

ABSTRACT

Teachers' Implementation of Social-Emotional Learning Programs in the Kindergarten Classroom

Denae Gerik, Ed.D.

Mentor: Bradley Carpenter, Ph.D.

Students' and teachers' social-emotional learning (SEL) is the foundation upon which academic learning can thrive. A systematic implementation of SEL programs, with teachers' awareness of how they affect the implementation, is needed to understand its implications of embedding SEL in the classroom. This qualitative study aimed to examine how kindergarten teachers' teaching through imitation, identification, and social roles, based on Bandura's social learning theory, shaped the implementation of CharacterStrong, an SEL program. The data from the research study indicated kindergarten teachers identified the intentionality of their actions, intentionality of their words, and perceptions of student behavior when implementing SEL in the classroom. Kindergarten teachers also influenced the implementation of CharacterStrong through their social roles in the classroom. The conclusions from the data highlighted future implications: a scaffolded approach to classroom implementation of SEL programs and self-reflection through the implementation process to build teacher self-efficacy. Future longitudinal research is needed to show the effects of SEL programs on students as they

progress through school and to study teacher perceived capacity to teach students social-emotional skills.

Teachers' Implementation of Social Emotional Learning in the Kindergarten Classroom

by

Denae Gerik, B.A., M.S.

A Dissertation

Approved by the Department of Educational Leadership

Jeffery Petersen, Ph.D., Chairperson

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of
Doctor of Education

Approved by the Dissertation Committee

Bradley Carpenter, Ph.D., Chairperson

Jonathan Eckert, Ed.D.

Leeanne Howell, Ph.D.

Joseph Kucera, Ed.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School

May 2022

J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

Copyright © 2022 by Denae Gerik

All rights reserved

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	viii
LIST OF TABLES	ix
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	x
CHAPTER ONE: Introduction	1
Background of the Problem	2
Statement of the Problem.....	6
Study Purpose	7
Research Questions	8
Theoretical Framework.....	8
Rationale, Relevance, Significance of the Study	9
Summary	10
Definition of Terms.....	11
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review	13
RTI	14
PBIS	19
SEL Programs	25
CharacterStrong	32
Importance of Implementation Fidelity	33
Theoretical Framework.....	34
Summary	37
CHAPTER THREE: Methodology.....	39
Qualitative Methodology	40

Research Design.....	41
Setting	43
Participants.....	44
Recruitment Process.....	44
Data Collection Methods	45
Data Analysis	48
Trustworthiness.....	51
Limitations	53
Chapter Summary	54
CHAPTER FOUR: Results.....	55
Study Overview	55
Context.....	59
Participants.....	59
Findings.....	62
Imitation	62
Identification.....	63
Social Roles	74
Conclusion	76
CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations	78
Study Overview	78
Conclusions.....	81
Research Question 1: How Do Kindergarten Teachers Describe the Intentionality of Their Action and Words Related to the CharacterStrong Program?.....	82
Research Question 3: How Do Kindergarten Teachers' Social Roles Change Their Implementation of the CharacterStrong Program?	87

Implications for Practice	89
Future Research	91
Conclusion	92
APPENDICES	94
APPENDIX A: Interview Protocol.....	95
APPENDIX B: Observation Protocol.....	97
REFERENCES	99

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1. Figure of the Case Defined.....	42
Figure 3.2. Data Analysis Procedures.....	50

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1. Overview of Social Learning Theory Tenets and the Connections to This Study	36
Table 3.1. Data Collection Types	48
Table 3.2. Codes and Anticipated Sources	49
Table 3.3. Proposed Methods to Establish Trustworthiness	51

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Completing my doctorate was an enormous effort supported by many people in my life. I would like to thank my husband, Zach, for encouraging me to pursue my goals, supporting me when I struggled, and believing that I can be a good mom while working and going back to school. Most importantly, thank you for being an amazing father to our children while I was working and writing. I could not have accomplished this without you. To my kids, Brennan, Graham, and Eberly, I hope you look back at the years I worked on my doctorate as a special time with your dad, and I hope it affirms your beliefs that you accomplish anything if you work hard and believe in yourself. I am proud to be your mom. To my parents, Debbie and Darrell, thank you for modeling hard work and determination and instilling confidence in my ability to accomplish goals I set. To my friend Valerie, I would not have considered starting the doctoral process had it not been for my admiration of your accomplishments and your supportive friendship.

To my chair, Dr. Bradley Carpenter, thank you for paving the doctoral path for our cohort. Your encouragement, support, and listening ear guided me through the dissertation process, and your mentorship has helped shape me as a leader. I am so grateful for all the time you spent helping me write my dissertation. Thank you to the rest of my committee, Dr. LeeAnn Howell, Dr. Jonathan Eckert, and Dr. Joe Kucera, for taking the time to provide valuable feedback and the opportunity to earn my Ed.D.

To my amazing cohort members, Donna, Jolene, Angel, Gayle, April, Amy and Meredith, what an amazing group of people to know. We spent many hours together

learning, laughing, sometimes crying, but always supporting one another. I am blessed to know each of you. Donna and Jolene, thank you for making me part of the Trio. The drive, determination, and compassion you both possess inspires me to be a better leader, and the support and wisdom you have given me has been life changing.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The purpose of education in the United States has transformed throughout history, from educating youth about religion, to creating a democracy, to assimilating immigrants into the country, to creating a workforce during the industrial revolution, and currently to preparing students for an unprecedented workforce and job requirements (Marzano et al., 2005). During the progression of education, discipline systems in education have evolved as well. Historically, discipline was based on deterrent theory, which posits that delinquency will occur if the benefits of the actions outweigh the cost (Fissel et al., 2019). Therefore, schools integrated systems where the cost or punishment was worse than any benefit the delinquent action would provide.

As schools have evolved, so has the research focused on this theory. The goal of punishment-based discipline within the school has been to maintain order and create a more productive environment (Sander, 2010). However, researchers have discovered school systems that implement harsher punishments do not decrease delinquent acts (Hall & Bacon, 2005; Fissel et al., 2019; Sander, 2010). In fact, the practice leads to harsher punishments and an increase in dropout rates. Often these delinquent acts result in placement in a juvenile detention center (Sander, 2010). Despite different disciplinary processes being implemented, students continue to be disciplined through exclusionary practices such as suspensions and expulsions, which exacerbate students' disconnection from school instead of restoration (Mergler et al., 2014).

Counter to exclusionary discipline systems, restorative justice systems of discipline center around students being accountable for their emotions and actions (Sander, 2010). This restorative system of discipline results in higher graduation rates and lower juvenile detention placements (Mergler et al., 2014). However, restorative discipline systems do not address student social and emotional needs prior to the presence of discipline problems (Mergler et al., 2014). Social-emotional learning (SEL) aims to teach social and emotional competencies, starting as early as prekindergarten. Teaching students these competencies when they first enter school helps students self-regulate and can prevent discipline issues (Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020).

Discipline systems involving both restorative focus and SEL focus do exist. An SEL program that focuses on teaching student self-regulation and aims to prevent discipline issues is CharacterStrong. However, the current level of implementation with such programs as CharacterStrong is unknown. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how the words, actions, behavior patterns, and social roles of kindergarten teachers shape (influence) the implementation of CharacterStrong, an SEL program.

Background of the Problem

The safety and security of students is the main priority for stakeholders in the nations' school systems. According to a 2015 Gallup Poll, "three in 10 (28%) parents in the United States feared for their child's physical safety while at school" (Fissel et al., 2019, p. 1344). While safety remains as the priority in education, children who enter elementary school are often not prepared to appropriately respond to a multitude of social

and emotional demands placed on them, and “in their efforts to solve these social problems, some children will begin to display aggressive behavior” (Hall & Bacon, 2005, p. 64). The violent behavior that students display, or are exposed to, can become threatening for other students and stakeholders in the school. These threats can manifest in bullying situations, physical altercations, and more serious situations involving weapons (Hall & Bacon, 2005).

The priority to keep students safe in these situations has transformed how school districts approach discipline. Schools have developed policies requiring referrals to the criminal justice or juvenile delinquency systems for any student who threatens students, teachers, or staff in any way (Katsiyannis et al., 2018). These policies, called zero-tolerance policies, were created to keep schools safe by removing students from school through suspension or expulsion. In Fissel et al.’s (2019) perspective, these policies assume that severe punishment will prevent students from having disciplinary infractions in the future. These aggressive policies governing student behavior give administrators the ability to assign students to in-school suspension or out-of-school suspension based on the degree of disruption their actions caused to the educational environment (Fissel et al., 2019). However, these structured and unstructured exclusionary options for discipline, in-school and out-of-school suspension, respectively, are not designed to develop students’ social and emotional skills to change their behavior (Fissel et al., 2019; Katsiyannis et al., 2018; Landrum et al., 2019). According to researchers, the reliance on zero-tolerance policies to keep schools safe has caused more harm than good by isolating students from the school; keeping them home without adult supervision (in some cases);

and eliminating school-based opportunities to develop academic, social, and emotional skills (Fissel et al., 2019; Sander, 2010; Mergler et al., 2014).

SEL is a term that emerged in 1994 after a meeting of researchers, educators, and child advocates hosted by the Fetzer Institute (CASEL, 2021). The purpose of the meeting was to create the best education-based practices for students' emotional and social development. "These SEL pioneers came together to address a concern about ineffective school programming and a lack of coordination among programs at the school level" (CASEL, 2021, para. 2). As a result, a framework of SEL was introduced to address students' needs and combine all the positive youth-development programs emerging in schools across the nation. SEL gained momentum and became part of educating the whole child (CASEL, 2021).

In 2008, the focus on SEL in schools took a back seat to academic performance with the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act to improve low-performing schools across the nation by standardizing learning (Fusarelli & Ayscue, 2019). This focus on standardized education and standardized testing was mandated across the country in reading, writing, mathematics, and science (Duffy et al., 2008). With the emphasis on academic achievement, U.S. districts felt pressure to increase performance academically. The No Child Left Behind Act (2002) and other subsequent legislation related to ensuring student academic success focused on core academic instructional time, which decreased instructional time on different subjects that focus on students' social-emotional well-being (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Researchers found that the high-stakes testing caused students to feel academic anxiety in their tested subjects more often than they did when learning about subjects that did not have high-stakes testing

accountability (Fusarelli & Ayscue, 2019; Whitney & Candelaria, 2017). Both students' and educators' social and emotional health dissipated into the background of standardized testing and accountability, while high-stakes testing, academic anxiety, and pressure to perform well continued to increase (Whitney & Candelaria, 2017).

Over a decade later, researchers now contend that inclusive discipline systems are a priority for school districts across the nation to support students' academic success. Therefore, the focus on SEL and inclusive discipline systems is a priority for school districts across the country to support students' academic success (Landrum et al., 2019; Mergler et al., 2014). An inclusive disciplinary system that allows students to learn from their actions is restorative justice. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2014), restorative justice focuses on keeping students in school, creating developmentally appropriate consequences, communicating with families, and bringing the focus back to preventing discipline instead of reacting to it. Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) also successfully have prevented behavior problems and punishment through shared expectations and understanding of consequences (Mergler et al., 2014). PBIS and restorative justice empower teachers and students to reward appropriate behavior and teach social norms that benefit all school stakeholders.

SEL, restorative justice, and PBIS focus on student behavior and communication strategies to improve school success. However, these programs lack a framework to examine the effectiveness of their strategies on student success. CASEL (2020) has identified five core social-emotional competencies all children need: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills. Bridgeland et al. (2013) reported that these five skills "provide a foundation for better

adjustment and academic performance as reflected in more positive social behaviors and peer relationships, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and improved grades and test scores” (p. 16). These competencies are essential, especially when children begin to spend time with adults outside of their home structure and begin to socialize with peers (Bridgeland et al., 2013; CASEL, 2020). Implementing an SEL program that focuses on these five competencies should provide students with skills to traverse school demands.

Statement of the Problem

Schools are responsible for their students’ academic growth, including developing their social and emotional skills (Whitney & Candelaria, 2017). Students’ social and emotional foundation begins at an early age, making starting with youngest students a critical target for interventions that teach them the emotional competencies required to navigate conflict in school (CASEL, 2020; Hall & Bacon, 2005). Part of this struggle is that students do not have educative experiences (Dewey, 2008) that teach them explicit social skills. Because of the lack of educative experiences, students continue to struggle to self-regulate and express their emotional needs (Landrum et al., 2019; Mergler et al., 2014). Teachers, too, struggle to provide the educative experiences that would address this lack of social awareness in students and inadvertently influence students through their own words, actions, and behaviors (Raičević et al., 2017). The reasons for teachers’ pedagogical struggles include academic demands, a lack of clear expectations and program guidelines, and other duties required of them (Landrum et al., 2019). Although SEL programs designed to support teachers and students exist, researchers have reported that SEL programs’ systematic implementation is not consistent, mandated, or assessed across the nation (Landrum et al., 2019; Mergler et al., 2014). This lack of systematic

implementation results in students dealing with rigorous academic demands and emotions they struggle to regulate (Whitney & Candelaria, 2017). Teachers influence the systematic implementation of any program they teach students through their words, actions, behavior patterns, and understanding of their social roles (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, systematic implementation of SEL programs, with teachers' awareness of how they affect the implementation, is needed to understand its implications fully.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how kindergarten teachers' teaching through imitation, identification, and social roles shapes the implementation of CharacterStrong, an SEL program. For this study, teaching through imitation means teachers model through words, actions, and behaviors. Through identification, students' unconscious social behavior is based on behavior patterns modeled by the teacher and other students in the class. Teaching through social roles addresses teacher awareness of their influence on students through their status in society.

The CharacterStrong program aims to help teachers implement planned SEL practices while assisting students in developing strategies to gain awareness and take responsibility for their emotions and actions. The CharacterStrong program provides a curriculum surrounding 10 character traits: courage, respect, perseverance, gratitude, honesty, kindness, empathy, responsibility, cooperation, and creativity; the program provides implementation plans and a pre- and postimplementation assessment (CharacterStrong, 2020). SEL is defined as a process for developing social and emotional competencies in children. Short-term goals are to promote student growth in the five core areas and improve student attitudes and beliefs about self and others (CASEL, 2020).

Through this study, teachers' modeling of their words, actions, and behaviors, along with their perceptions and attitudes towards the CharacterStrong program, were explored to determine how Bandura's (1977) social learning theory affected the implementation of the program. After analyzing these research findings, results of this study may support the district in determining the next steps to take to help teachers implement the CharacterStrong program or any program that requires implementation.

Research Questions

1. How do kindergarten teachers describe the intentionality of their words and actions related to the CharacterStrong program?
2. How do kindergarten teachers' behavior patterns, related to SEL, manifest in the classroom during the CharacterStrong program implementation?
3. How do kindergarten teachers' social roles change their implementation of the CharacterStrong program?

Theoretical Framework

Social learning theory, developed by Albert Bandura (1977), is the idea that students learn best through role models or experiences within a classroom. Bandura theorized that behavior patterns were created based on experiences with role models in school unconsciously without intention (Raičević et al., 2017). Social learning theory has three central tenets: learning by imitation, learning by identification, and learning by social roles (Bandura, 1977). Each one of these tenets becomes more complex as students age (Raičević et al., 2017).

School systems are important socialization sources where students learn to adopt socially appropriate behavior at the earliest age. As students interact in school, negative

behavior messages can be learned just as easily as positives; therefore, schools need to be systemic and conscious of what messages students receive through teacher interactions. Teacher awareness of their influence on students through their gestures, speech, beliefs, actions, and status in society is another aspect in educating students (Raičević et al., 2017). This is where SEL fits into Bandura's (1977) theory. If teachers model how to appropriately interact socially and emotionally with other students in a class, students will instinctively learn appropriate behaviors. Through this study, teachers might gain more awareness of their behavior in the classroom and its powerful influence over the students they work with daily.

Rationale, Relevance, Significance of the Study

Kindergarten students come to school with various background experiences; some students come from prekindergarten, some from daycare, whereas others have stayed with a loved one at home and have not assimilated to school structure (Hall & Bacon, 2005). Examining teachers' modeling of their words, actions, and behavior patterns while teaching the CharacterStrong program will provide data on the effects of social learning theory when implementing a program. Starting the CharacterStrong program as early as kindergarten allows students to learn the important SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CharacterStrong, 2020). When students experience these competencies at a young age, it allows them to refine and use these practices as they continue through school (Bridgeland et al., 2013). The study is also important because of how Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) restrictions have potentially hindered students' social and emotional development. With

the quarantine, not all students are socializing or having their emotional needs met or further developed.

Conducting a qualitative evaluation allowed me to collect data in three areas of implementation of CharacterStrong: (a) through observing the classrooms, (b) through interviewing teachers, and (c) through analyzing program materials. With these areas of data, I observed teachers' behavior patterns in action while they implemented the CharacterStrong curriculum and documented what I observe. I interviewed teachers to determine their understanding of their social roles in the classroom during program implementation. I also examined the content of the program for the specific intentions and aims of the CharacterStrong program. Through these three levels of data collection, I could provide an analysis focused on teachers' words, actions, behavior patterns, and beliefs while implementing the CharacterStrong program launched in 2020 at a central Texas school district.

Summary

School systems are designed to help students grow academically while making sure they are safe. Discipline policies that help keep students safe have evolved. These policies have been affected by mandates, standardized testing, and legislation, which has taken away from teacher and student social-emotional health. The focus on student and teacher well-being has not been a priority until recently with SEL programs' reintroduction. Students' highest academic potential is reached when students' social and emotional needs are met. Schools cannot isolate academics from social well-being and expect to have a sustainable, productive environment. SEL programs help districts guide administrators, teachers, and students through learning, examples, and discussions. These

programs are helpful for districts only to the extent of successful implementation of the program. Teachers' words, actions, behavior patterns, and understanding of social roles affect the implementation of any program that is used in the classroom. This study investigated how teachers' words, actions, behavior patterns, and social roles affected the implementation of CharacterStrong, an SEL program.

Definition of Terms

CharacterStrong is an SEL program that offers “practical, innovative resources to help improve school safety & culture and make implementing social-emotional learning and character education a manageable, effective practice” (CharacterStrong, n.d.-a).

Educative experiences are experiences in which learners make a connection between what they do to things and what happens in consequence (Dewey, 1916/2008).

The *five core competencies of SEL*, according to CASEL (2020), are the following. *Self-awareness* means to know one's strengths and limitations with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a “growth mindset” (CASEL, 2020, p. 2). *Self-management* means to effectively manage stress, control impulses, and self-motivate to set and achieve goals. *Social awareness* means to “understand the perspectives of others and empathize with them, including those from diverse backgrounds” and cultures (CASEL, 2020, p. 2). *Relationship skills* mean to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively and seek and offer help when needed. *Responsible decision-making* means to “make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions” based on ethical standards, safety, and social norms (CASEL, 2020, p. 2).

Restorative justice is an approach that helps students to take responsibility for their behavior in a supportive environment focused on teaching rather than punishment (Mirsky, 2011).

Social learning theory is Albert Bandura's (1977) theory that students learn through observation, imitation, and modeling. He theorized that behavior patterns were created based on experiences with role models unconsciously without intention (Raičević et al., 2017)

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a process for developing social and emotional competencies in children. The short-term goals of SEL are to promote student growth in the five core areas and to improve student attitudes and beliefs about self and others (CASEL, 2020).

Standardized assessments are defined as tests that “consist of items which are judged to reflect important aspects of widely used curriculum materials” (Linn, 1983, p. 180) and provide a general summary of student performance on a year-to-year basis, so school districts have an indication of improvement or decline in overall performance (Linn, 1983).

Zero-tolerance policies require schools to refer students to the criminal justice or juvenile delinquency systems if they bring a firearm or weapon to school (Katsiyannis et al., 2018).

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Any SEL curriculum includes the skills children and adults develop over time through life experiences, family values, and school settings (CASEL, 2020). According to CASEL (2020), SEL encompasses five core social-emotional competencies all children need: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills. Other education reforms similar to SEL are response to intervention (RTI) and PBIS. These reforms intended to set up a system for implementing interventions to support students' academic and behavior success. The structure of these programs' implementation is vital to inform the research behind SEL program implementation.

This section examines the research behind implementation fidelity successes and failures in three educational reforms: RTI, PBIS, and SEL. Implementation fidelity refers to the relative level of adherence to a program set to the criterion intended by the author (Wanless & Domitrovich, 2015). I also introduce Bandura's (1977) social learning theory as a theoretical framework to examine how teachers' words, actions, and behaviors influence the implementation and fidelity of CharacterStrong. Examining the research of the implementation and fidelity of these reforms and using Bandura's social learning theory as a framework guided my research study.

RTI

RTI is an education reform implemented after the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) and the No Child Left Behind Act (2002). The RTI framework is a three-tier system to identify students who need early intervention academically or behaviorally and provide remediation (Keller-Margulis, 2012). Facilitating RTI programs across the nation aimed to help regulate the overidentification of students with disabilities receiving special education services while also providing more services to ethnic minority students (Alahmari, 2019). RTI also adhered to the legal requirement for students with disabilities to be educated in the least restrictive environment as possible, which in many cases is the general education classroom (Alahmari, 2019).

The RTI process has numerous benefits that include intervention for students with academic needs, identifying students who need more intensive instructional services, and assessment linked to instruction (Keller-Margulis, 2012). The process begins in the classroom with high-quality instruction and universal screeners to assess students throughout the school year. Students who struggle with learning are given interventions at progressing intensity levels to fill in knowledge gaps or identify a learning disability (Keller-Margulis, 2012). RTI was designed as a decision-making tool to help identify students who need more intense accommodations or quality for special education (RTI Action Network, n.d.). Tier 1 of RTI is high-quality classroom instruction provided by qualified educators. Students are periodically assessed through universal screeners to create a baseline of each student's academic and behavioral capacity. Students who do not show growth or are significantly below grade level are moved into the next level of

intervention: Tier 2 (RTI Action Network, n.d.). In Tier 2, students are provided with targeted intervention based on instructional needs. Students who show improvement in their progress-monitoring data and can be successful in the general education setting without Tier 2 interventions are moved back to Tier 1 (Special Education Guide, 2021). Tier 3 support services are intense, individualized interventions provided more frequently. Tier 3 support may be done through the special education classroom or an interventionist (IRIS Center, 2020).

Several studies about RTI program implementation and fidelity provided information on best practices when implementing a new system (Glover & DiPerna, 2007). Glover and DiPerna (2007) studied the science behind the RTI delivery service in schools. Their study examined the delivery of RTI services by teachers and interventionists and how this affected students' services. Glover and DiPerna discovered five core service delivery components for "RTI service delivery: (a) multitier implementation, (b) student assessment and decision making, (c) evidence-based intervention provision, (d) maintenance of procedural integrity, and (e) development and sustainability of systems-level capacity" (p. 527). Research surrounding the first two core service-delivery measures, multitier implementation and student assessment and decision-making, showed interventions that are tiered from the whole school to an individualized level improved students' academic abilities (Glover & DiPerna, 2007). Glover and DiPerna's research study showed students benefit from multitiered interventions through RTI services. Their study also revealed the compatibility of the assessment tools used to make data-driven decisions should be evaluated by districts to

ensure the baseline academic performance measures inform the interventions students need.

Evidence-based intervention provision is the next of the five core components, which examines the efficacy of students' individualized support. Glover and DiPerna (2007) found when protocols for intervention were provided, as opposed to individualized interventions, efficacy was increased, and interventions were more consistently offered. As a result, interventions showed "significant performance benefits for students participating in targeted phonemic awareness, letter sounds, decoding, encoding, and fluency instruction from kindergarten through the end of second grade" (Glover & DiPerna, 2007, p. 531). Ensuring teachers and interventionists have a standard protocol and support within executing the RTI system creates a better outcome for the students receiving the services.

Maintenance of procedural integrity is the essential core components of service delivery because all the previous pieces can be in place. Yet, if the procedural integrity, often called fidelity, is not followed consistently or measured for validity, then the data surrounding the interventions can be unreliable (Glover & DiPerna, 2007). Procedural integrity should include training, consultation, and supports embedded throughout the process. Training provided to the interventionist has shown to make a difference in the implementation and fidelity of RTI (Glover & DiPerna, 2007).

The fifth and final core component of service delivery for RTI that Glover and DiPerna (2007) found is the development and sustainability of systems-level capacity. Their study highlighted that implementing the four components of RTI system delivery with implementation and fidelity will lead to a change in systems, but this change must

be supported by the highest leadership levels (Glover & DiPerna, 2007). The Glover and DiPerna examination of successful implementation of RTI highlighted the components that are successful and addressed gaps in research. Their study informed other program implementation by providing data on teacher and interventionist actions and behaviors that affect the intervention's delivery to students and the program's implementation.

VanDerHeyden et al. (2007) studied the effects of implementing a systematic RTI and its ability to identify and evaluate students with learning disabilities. One of the problems in identifying and assessing students who need special education services using the RTI model is that decisions are made using more than one activity or variable, making implementation fidelity challenging to measure (VanDerHeyden et al., 2007). The authors found research on the individual components of the process, but research was lacking on the RTI process as a whole. The second issue is the research examining the processes often is done in a lab setting by a paid professional who understands the interventions and process. That environment is vastly different from the classroom, where many factors and distractions affect intervention services (VanDerHeyden et al., 2007).

VanDerHeyden et al. (2007) examined the System to Enhance Educational Performance (STEEP), an RTI model, in five elementary schools in the southwestern United States. The districts consisted of mostly middle-class families, and the student-to-teacher ratio was 23:1. The STEEP model "consists of a series of assessment and intervention procedures with specific decision rules to identify children who might benefit from an eligibility evaluation" (VanDerHeyden et al., 2007, p. 228). Using the STEEP model instead of teacher identification of students who need intervention provided the decision-making team with data necessary to determine whether the student

needed intervention and whether intervention was best given through special education services. The interventionist and teacher worked together through four steps involved with the STEEP process: “(1) universal screening, (2) class-wide intervention, (3) brief assessment of the effect of incentives on performance, and (4) assessment of the child’s response to a short-term standardized intervention delivered with integrity in the regular classroom setting” (VanDerHeyden et al., 2007, p. 229).

The most valuable parts of the STEEP process were Steps 3 and 4 because the school interventionist or psychologist collected the intervention data weekly, based on the degree to which the student received the intervention correctly and the student’s performance on the skill that was the focus of the intervention (VanDerHeyden et al., 2007). If complications occurred during the intervention the teacher provided, the interventionist retaught the teacher the intervention, and the process started over. The study results showed that when using STEEP, instead of the traditional RTI referral process, fewer students were referred for special education services. However, the evaluated students qualified for services, which increased qualifications from the baseline years (VanDerHeyden et al., 2007). Implementing STEEP resulted in the district spending less money and time evaluating students who did not need to be assessed and supporting those who had an actual learning disability. Having a system in place like STEEP ensured students received the most relevant interventions to help their specific needs. The study conducted by VanDerHeyden et al. examined how the RTI process changed if teachers and interventionists worked together using the STEEP model to identify students who need intervention, deliver the intervention in a classroom setting, and evaluate the results of the intervention provided. The study resulted in fewer student

referrals for special education and more consistent interventions in a class-wide setting, which led to teacher self-efficacy for differentiated instruction (VanDerHeyden et al., 2007). Using a systematic approach like the STEEP model helps teachers and interventionists be more aware of their words, actions, and behaviors that affect the program they are implementing. The benefits of consistent implementation and fidelity of a systemic approach to intervention provide better services and outcomes for students' academic needs.

The two research studies (Glover & DiPerna, 2007; VanDerHeyden et al., 2007) that examined the implementation and fidelity of RTI programs found a systemic approach to implementing a program affected the words, actions, and behaviors of the teachers, interventionist, and leadership. The more specific the system was, the more relevant interventions became, which lessened the variability in delivery from teachers and interventionists.

PBIS

PBIS is an organized approach to improving students' positive behavior through school-wide procedures, behavior expectations, and communication. PBIS is organized in a three-tier model similar to RTI and is designed to decrease negative behavior while changing organizational health (Bradshaw et al., 2008). Tier 1 focuses on preventing unwanted behavior through proactive social skills, systems, and acknowledgment of appropriate student behavior (Center on PBIS, 2021). The foundation of the approach includes a leadership team meeting regularly to examine data to make decisions, a commitment statement establishing a positive school-wide culture, establishment of school-wide expectations and procedures, professional development for staff concerning

best behavior practices and systems, and personnel evaluations (Center on PBIS, 2021). Tier 2 consists of additional targeted interventions using a screener to identify students who need extra support and provide specific behavior interventions. Staff and students practice self-regulation, seek opportunities for positive reinforcement, and review data to examine the outcomes of PBIS (Center on PBIS, 2021). Tier 3 is for students who need more intensive support services, testing, and screening for possible diagnosis of behavior issues resulting in a behavior intervention plan (Center on PBIS, 2021). Research surrounding PBIS has shown reduced office referrals, improved behavior systems, and improved academic achievement, which lead to better organizational health for a school (Bradshaw et al., 2008).

Noltemeyer et al. (2019) examined data from 153 schools in Ohio to explore the differences in academic and behavioral outcomes based on implementation fidelity of PBIS. They measured these outcomes using the Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI). The TFI is a “coach guided self-assessment tool that measures PBIS implementation fidelity across three tiers” and is recommended as an evaluation tool for schoolwide PBIS in several states (Noltemeyer et al., 2019, p. 82). The TFI uses a Likert scale for questions about implementation in all three tiers of PBIS; the questions assess “whether the practice described in the item is not implemented (score of 0), partially implemented (score of 1), or fully implemented (score of 2)” (Noltemeyer et al., 2019, p. 82). The score is added up using the points earned divided by the point possible, where 70% or higher in each tier is presumed to result in improved student outcomes. The study found out of the 153 Ohio schools implementing PBIS, those schools that scored a 70% or higher in Tier 1 on the TFI had fewer out-of-school suspensions than the schools that scored below 70% on the

TFI (Noltemeyer et al., 2019). The same study did not find a correlation between the higher academic index score and a Tier 1 TFI score of above 70% (Noltemeyer et al., 2019). Using the TFI as an assessment tool helped determine the success of PBIS as a school-wide behavior system and positive organizational health. Findings in the Noltemeyer et al. (2019) study illustrated the need for assessment and data of program implementation and fidelity to assess what interventions are efficacious.

Researchers Sugai and Horner (2020) studied PBIS implementation processes through a longitudinal study of 26,000 schools across the United States. During their examination of this national study, they found factors that account for sustainability. The PBIS model for implementation is organized through building-level, district-level, and state-level teams using strategies for “(a) selecting effective practices, (b) organizing the systems to support these practices, and (c) using a stage-based implementation process” (Sugai & Horner, 2020, p. 122). Teams successfully implementing the PBIS model used the National Implementation Research Network stages of implementation, which is the process of five distinct implementation stages and considerations for each step (Sugai & Horner, 2020). The five stages are exploration, installation, initial implementation, full implementation, and sustained and scaled implementation (National Implementation Research Network, n.d.). These stages helped guide PBIS leadership teams fluidly through the implementation process. For example, if a school or leadership team experienced turnover, then moving from full implementation back to initial was expected, but the National Implementation Research Network model provided a guide for how to move forward to full implementation for PBIS (Sugai & Horner, 2020).

Through the study of the 26,000 schools and previous research, Sugai and Horner (2002) found reaching the fourth level of the National Implementation Research Network model, full implementation of PBIS, required student benefit documentation concerning discipline and assessment of system implementation fidelity. Their research also found 65% of the schools implementing Tier 1 PBIS performed at or above the expected criterion set by the TFI scale of 70% or above (Sugai & Horner, 2020). Through their national study, Sugai and Horner found areas of success in adopting PBIS implementation using the Blueprint Model and the National Implementation Research Network five stages of implementation. They also found successful implement of Tier 1 in 65% of schools using PBIS but gaps remaining in reaching the fifth level of implementation (Sugai & Horner, 2020). This study informed the implementation and fidelity research by providing a model that guides schools and teams to implement and assess each level's success before pursuing the next.

Another study conducted by Noltemeyer et al. (2017) examined PBIS development and implementation of recognition systems around the nation and specifically Ohio. They examined recognition systems because the research indicated state-wide recognition systems improve the fidelity of implementation by systematically monitoring the implementation, which positively affects the PBIS system's sustainability. However, gaps remain in the research about the development and implementation of the systems currently in place in the United States (Noltemeyer et al., 2017). The research study examined 12 states with PBIS systems that were empirically researched and had state-level evaluation and recognition systems in place. The systems had multiple recognition levels that increased in rigor at each level, with most states using a three-level

recognition system. Nine of the states used the TFI assessment for their levels of recognition.

As explained earlier, the TFI is a coach-guided self-assessment that teams use to evaluate the degree and fidelity with which their staff is implementing PBIS at each tier with a score of 70% or higher to qualify for the first level of recognition (Noltemeyer et al., 2017). Other measurement systems evaluate levels for recognition. The Schoolwide Evaluation Tool assesses prevention practices, with 80% as a minimum required score for recognition; Benchmarks of Quality assesses only Tier 1 implementation, with 70% being the minimum for recognition; the Self-Assessment Survey was used as part of the application process, but not for overall recognition; and the Team Implementation Checklist was used as an optional measure for completing the application process (Noltemeyer et al., 2017). Recognition at the state level consisted of letters of recognition, recognition on state websites, certificates, and banners. Some of the states labeled schools as demonstration sites where other schools could learn (Noltemeyer et al., 2017).

The remainder of the research study focused on Ohio's PBIS recognition model. In the early 2000s Ohio was a national leader in developing an integrated PBIS and academic support system, but state administration priorities changed in 2007, and many of these systems fell apart (Noltemeyer et al., 2017). In 2013 Ohio's Department of Education and Miami University's Center for School-Based Mental Health Programs helped fund a grant allowing each regional State Support Team to adopt uniform measures for the fidelity of implementation and recognition (Noltemeyer et al., 2017). The process to implement this state-wide PBIS recognition system took 2 years; the

purpose was to identify “schools that exemplify the highest levels of systems, data, and practices in their implementation of PBIS” (Noltemeyer et al., 2017, p. 228). The assessment tool for the recognition was the TFI because of its ability to measure the implementation of the core features of PBIS in each tier (Noltemeyer et al., 2017).

Throughout the 2 year process, one of the most helpful measurements of the fidelity of implementation was adding student behavior outcomes. The system tracked behavior incidents per 100 students, which helped “differentiate schools by their degree of implementation, and these differences between award levels are related to various behavioral outcomes in these schools” (Noltemeyer et al., 2017, p. 237). As a result, states that do not utilize a recognition system for PBIS can examine the different models, processes, measurement tools, and outcomes that this research study addressed. Another implication for state and local practice is teams need to be proactive and look for potential barriers in maintaining a recognition system and finding a universal, empirically supported implementation tool such as the TFI (Noltemeyer et al., 2017). School psychologists or behavior experts should be active in the PBIS process at both the local and state recognition levels; they also should continue their professional training in systems change theory and evaluate evidence-based practices for PBIS to be implemented with fidelity (Noltemeyer et al., 2017). The study conducted by Noltemeyer et al. (2017) demonstrated the benefits of a state-wide systematic measurement of intervention programs to indicate success or need for improvement while providing recognition for districts going above and beyond to support students’ needs.

PBIS is a system of scaffolding interventions through a three-tier organization model. At each tier, different interventions are used and evaluated for their effectiveness.

The research studies examined revealed best practices for implementing PBIS. The first study measured the implementation and fidelity of PBIS, utilizing an assessment tool called TFI (Noltemeyer et al., 2019). This study concluded that using an assessment tool resulted in better implementation fidelity of the program. The second study found success in using implementation stages, which included a process for looking at the implementation of each tier of intervention (Sugai & Horner, 2020). The final study examined the effectiveness of a recognition system for PBIS programs state-wide. The recognition system outlined achievement levels with the implementation of PBIS by using the TFI as the measurement tool (Noltemeyer et al., 2017). All three studies found that implementing a PBIS program to the best level possible requires a measurement tool, protocol, or system that can help eliminate random variation within the implementation process.

SEL Programs

SEL programs are being integrated into the school curriculum all over the world. Many programs focus on developing character, building relationships, and enhancing school climate and culture (Durlak et al., 2011). SEL programs that incorporate at least one component focusing on social skills and explicitly target specific social-emotional skills will improve student outcomes (Durlak, 2017). SEL interventions have evolved, and the evidence from several meta-analyses showed SEL can help students be more successful socially and academically; however, the research about how to implement these programs with fidelity is limited (Wanless & Domitrovich, 2015).

Anderson et al. (2020) examined the fidelity of implementing the SEL program, Conscious Discipline, in early childhood programs. The researchers looked specifically at

students' executive function skills concerning teachers' fidelity of implementation. Executive function skills are "higher-order, self-regulatory cognitive processes that aid in the monitoring and control of thought and action" (Carlson et al., 2016, p. 45). Executive function skills have several components: (a) cognitive flexibility, (b) inhibitory control, and (c) working memory (Anderson et al., 2020). Research has shown executive function skills are more susceptible to environmental factors in the early stages of childhood development, so examining the Conscious Discipline program's effects on children and their environment worked to provide a platform for research (Anderson et al., 2020). Conscious Discipline is a model that focuses on creating a safe and loving environment where students can learn to self-regulate. Students learn how to self-regulate through modeling by teachers, so not only do students learn how to manage their thoughts and feelings, but teachers do as well (Anderson et al., 2020).

The Anderson et al. (2020) study included 293 students from 45 different classrooms where Conscious Discipline was implemented; teachers were trained in various methods under Conscious Discipline but had been implementing the program for an average of 2 years. A trained Conscious Discipline coach visited all classrooms to observe fidelity using the Conscious Discipline Rubric Progress Assessments. The coach assessed teachers on 18 items within seven larger domains: Composure, Adult Assertiveness/Teaching assertiveness to Children, Encouragement, Choices, Empathy, Positive Intent, and Consequences. Teachers were rated using a 4-point scale from 1 (*little or no improvement*) to 4 (*fully functional development and implementation*). Students in classrooms where teachers demonstrated higher fidelity with the Conscious Discipline rubric had "significantly greater improvements in EF [executive function]"

skills than children in classrooms with lower fidelity” (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 18). Managing Classroom Behavior had the most substantial influence on executive function skills of students in the class; teachers who scored higher on the rubric in this factor focused on reducing classroom stress, increased a sense of safety, and gave students specific activities that encouraged problem-solving (Anderson et al., 2020). Researchers did not find a strong correlation between Conscious Discipline fidelity scores and necessary academic skills. The reason is that Conscious Discipline is not an educational program; executive function skills may not directly influence academic domains, although these skills may indirectly improve students’ academic learning over time (Anderson et al., 2020). Future studies exploring executive function skills and SEL should focus on their effect on academic improvement during a longitudinal study following students from prekindergarten or kindergarten to high school. Measuring the fidelity of implementation in an SEL curriculum like Conscious Discipline provides information on helping students with social skills, self-efficacy, and improved self-regulation.

Morrison et al. (2019) examined implementing an SEL program, Sanford Harmony, examining the successes and shortfalls of implementation fidelity in a school setting. The study was a mixed-methods design that collected qualitative and quantitative data concurrently (Morrison et al., 2019). Participants in the study consisted of principals, teachers, and students from five elementary schools in a large metropolitan area in the western United States. Schools implementing the Sanford Harmony program throughout 2017-2018 received \$25,000 to participate from research partner National University.

The schools were made up of an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse population of 3,000 students (Morrison et al., 2019).

Research teams conducted site visits at the five elementary schools; 27 classroom observations; and interviews with separate focus groups of principals, teachers, and students. Teachers participated in an online survey, whereas students in Grades 3–5 participated in a printed survey; both surveys asked questions using a Likert-type scale for responses. Schools gave the research team behavior data they factored into their data collection methods (Morrison et al., 2019). During the site visits, the research team examined classroom structure context and implementation while observing the teacher and students' engagement levels. Schools were required to set SEL goals before implementing Sanford Harmony. These goals focused on the program's unit themes: diversity and inclusion, empathy, critical thinking, communication, problem-solving, and peer relationships. Trainers from Sanford Harmony led a short professional development training on an overview of the program and implemented the practices within their classrooms (Morrison et al., 2019).

After a year of implementing Sanford Harmony, the results from the study showed promising data for future implementation and changes that would help move the program forward. Principals and teachers agreed that the program's training before beginning the program was too limited and did not permit teachers to feel prepared to implement it effectively. Two of the schools requested follow-up training during the school year, which resulted in "much more positive perceptions of the program and increased teachers' comfort in implementing program components" (Morrison et al., 2019, p. 24). Teachers felt that because the program was in a pilot year, they felt less

pressure to implement all the program's fidelity aspects. In two schools, the leadership team was late to implement the program, which caused a lack of consistency because routines in classrooms were already established (Morrison et al., 2019). Although implementation varied from the beginning, as the year progressed, the consistently reported components being used over 90% of the time were the Quick Connection Cards, Meet Up, and Buddy Up (Morrison et al., 2019). Quick Connection Cards contain ideas for teachers to use to open up discussions or activities that "provide peers with opportunities to share, think, collaborate, and have fun together" (Sanford Harmony, 2017, p. 2). Meet Up is a daily practice where the teacher and students participate in class meetings to talk about problems, solutions, and exchange ideas to achieve a more connected classroom (Sanford Harmony, 2015). Buddy Up is a peer buddy system that meets five times a week for two 45-min sessions where the buddies complete an activity or discussion. The buddies change each week so that students can learn to work together cooperatively, even in diverse settings (Sanford Harmony, 2015).

Teacher survey results showed that even with various implementation fidelity experiences, 70%–95% of teachers recommend the program because it is beneficial for students (Morrison et al., 2019). Of those teachers who used the program tools, 85% indicated the tools were effective. Student survey results highlighted that students would recommend the program to other students; one stated, "I think it is great, it puts a smile on everyone's face, and that is what it is all about—the inventor did a good thing!" (Morrison et al., 2019, p. 27). In the student focus groups, multiple students expressed the program helped them become better at making friends and interacting with new people (Morrison et al., 2019). Overall, the program had a successful first year, with many of the

teachers and principals indicating the following year would have more accountability of implementation and training for teachers.

Durlak et al. (2011) conducted a large-scale meta-analysis study investigating the impact of an SEL curriculum on students. They wanted to know “what outcomes are achieved by interventions that attempt to enhance children’s emotional and social skills” (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 407). The meta-analysis included 213 studies that examined SEL curriculum implementation and interventions administered by teachers, nonschool personnel, and component supplements that involved parents. More than half of the schools (56%) were elementary, 31% were middle schools, and the remainder were high schools; overall, 270,034 students were involved in the studies (Durlak et al., 2011).

The SEL curriculum was conducted in the classroom using program implementation protocols that yielded significant results if the focus was on four recommended practices: use “a sequenced step-by-step training approach, use active forms of learning, focus sufficient time on skill development, and have explicit learning goals” (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 408). These four practices form the acronym SAFE (sequenced, active, focused, and explicit). The researchers coded how many SAFE practices were used to implement the SEL interventions provided by classroom teachers, nonschool personnel, and parent feedback forms. The study’s student outcomes were organized into six categories: SEL skills, attitudes, positive social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011).

The results revealed the classroom teachers’ SEL curriculum showed growth in all six student outcome categories. In contrast, the SEL curriculum implemented by nonschool personnel, university students, showed an increase in only three of the student

outcomes: improved SEL skills, prosocial attitudes, and reduced conduct problems; the parent feedback forms also showed a reduced number of positive student outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011). The programs that followed all four of the SAFE program implementation protocols in elementary and secondary schools resulted in significant positive changes in students' SEL skill set, attitudes, social behaviors, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011). When classroom teachers followed the SAFE program implementation protocols, students experienced the most favorable outcomes. These interventions can be incorporated into classroom routines, and they do not require personnel outside of the school to be successful (Durlak et al., 2011). SEL programs that have measurement tools to evaluate success result in better implementation of the program, which positively affects students, staff, and overall organizational health of the school.

SEL programs aim to help students develop social-emotional and relationship-building skills while also enhancing the school climate. In the first study, Anderson et al. (2020) found that teachers who had a high ability to implement the program with fidelity had students with better executive function skills, which in turn helped their social-emotional skills. The second study revealed that training and professional development before and during implementing an SEL program were vital to teacher and leadership team fidelity to the program (Noltemeyer et al., 2017). Like the PBIS study findings, the final SEL study emphasized using measurement tools to evaluate the program's implementation resulted in better fidelity to the program (Durlak et al., 2011).

CharacterStrong

CharacterStrong is an SEL program established in 2018 by Houston Kraft and Jon Norwin. Kraft and Norwin are motivational speakers and kindness advocates who created the CharacterStrong program using CASEL’s framework and five SEL areas (CharacterStrong, 2020). CharacterStrong uses the CASEL framework to build the program. The five competencies of SEL, according to CASEL (2020), are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills. Self-awareness is the ability to reflect on one’s thoughts, actions, and beliefs to understand what motivates behavior (CASEL, 2020). The goal of being more self-aware is to identify emotions, build confidence, grow self-efficacy, and create a growth mindset (CASEL, 2020). Self-management is the ability to “regulate emotions, manage stress, and monitor and achieve behaviors related to school and life success” (CharacterStrong, 2019, p. 1). Social awareness is defined as showing empathy, acknowledging diversity, understanding social and emotional norms, and recognizing family and school support (CharacterStrong, 2019). Responsible decision-making is the ability to problem-solve and maintain accountability for behaviors (CharacterStrong, 2019). The final SEL competency is focused on relationship skills, the ability to create relationships with diverse groups of people and appropriately communicate to express needs and resolve conflicts (CharacterStrong, 2019). Using these five competencies for SEL in conjunction with the 10 character traits (courage, perseverance, honesty, respect, gratitude, kindness, responsibility, cooperation, creativity, and empathy) yields a total of 15 learning standards that comprise the curriculum of the program.

The CharacterStrong program is a three-phase process with nine steps in each phase. The three stages are “clarity (what people believe or care about), competence (what do people know how to do), and consistency (what do people do daily or weekly)” (CharacterStrong, n.d.-b, para. 2). The first phase establishes “a common language and a shared vision” for SEL learning to identify SEL’s purpose and benefits (CharacterStrong, n.d.-b, para. 3). Identifying the purpose and benefits of SEL is accomplished through professional development provided by the PD team at CharacterStrong, or districts can use the program’s resources and conduct their own professional development (CharacterStrong, n.d.-b). The second phase, competence, focuses on explicitly and implicitly teaching students and staff the behaviors and skills to ensure the program’s implementation. This is supported by curriculum, content, and resources for both elementary and secondary schools. The third phase, consistency, focuses on measuring “each of the four CharacterStrong Core Components through simple implementation guides and reliable data-gathering techniques” (CharacterStrong, n.d.-b, para. 4). This final phase consists of using an implementation and fidelity rubric to assess the systematic approach and provide data collection techniques. It builds staff self-efficacy and offers professional development to recalibrate previous learning (CharacterStrong, n.d.-b).

Importance of Implementation Fidelity

To measure the success of any intervention, implementation and fidelity must adhere to a framework to analyze the intervention’s success and the extent to which future outcomes can be improved (Carroll et al., 2007). The three education reforms, RTI, PBIS, and SEL, are all interventions that aim to improve students’ academics and well-

being. These interventions have various models and frameworks to follow to transform theory into practice. However, a universal conceptual framework would be useful to understand how teachers' awareness of their influence on students through their gestures, speech, beliefs, actions, and status in society affects teachers' ability to implement a program with fidelity (Raičević et al., 2017).

The degree to which implementation fidelity is influenced by teachers' awareness of their influence on students learning can be the difference between evidence-based interventions changing the trajectory of a student's academic career and well-being or failure of a school system's interventions (Carroll et al., 2007). Therefore, Bandura's (1977) social learning theory was used as a framework for assessing teachers' awareness of their influence on students to inform how well interventions are implemented with fidelity.

Theoretical Framework

School is the first social and learning setting students experience outside of the family circle. This change in social institutions affects the experience of the learner. Learning in a school setting is not just incumbent on students' ability to learn or teachers' ability to teach. Learning is also in the social structure of the subject matter and how social relations with others are perceived (Erickson et al., 2008). Teachers have a tremendous influence in determining the "social ecology of a classroom response to learners' attempts to learn" (Erickson et al., 2008, p. 205) and influence students in many ways. Social learning theory, developed by Albert Bandura (1977), is the idea that students learn best through role models or experiences within a classroom. Bandura theorized that behavior patterns were created based on experiences with role models in

school unconsciously without intention (Raičević et al., 2017). There are three central tenets of social learning theory: learning by imitation, learning by identification, and learning by social roles (Bandura, 1977). Each of these tenets becomes more complex as students age (Raičević et al., 2017).

Learning by imitation is when teachers and students model through words, actions, and behaviors. Bandura (1977) defined this imitation as “learning in which certain behavior, adopted by emulation . . . imitates the behavior of the model” (p. 83). Through their interactions, gestures, and speech, teachers influence others in the classroom setting. Learning by identification is a conscious social behavior because it is based on behavior patterns, not solely imitation. Bandura explained, “Behavior patterns are adopted spontaneously, without conscious intention and efforts to influence the behavior of others” (p. 84). I expect students to be exposed to a teacher’s behavior patterns over a school year in the classroom setting. Unintentionally, students observe and adapt their attitudes and behaviors according to the teacher’s behavior patterns. The final tenet of Bandura’s theory is learning social roles. This tenet is the most sophisticated of the three because it is “characterized by the adoption of behaviors that bind to certain positions and roles in society” (Raičević et al., 2017, p. 236). Teacher awareness of their influence on students through their gestures, speech, beliefs, actions, and status in society is another aspect of educating students (Raičević et al., 2017). In Table 1.1, I present an overview of the tenets of social learning theory and the potential connections to this study.

Table 1.1

Overview of Social Learning Theory Tenets and the Connections to This Study

Main tenet of social learning theory	Definition ^a	Connection to study
Learning by imitation	Learning from expert others through imitation	Teachers' gestures, speech, and facial expressions Students observing and adapting their gestures, speech, and facial expressions Students' learning through the modeling
Learning by identification	Behavior patterns adopted by the influences from expert others	Teachers' beliefs, attitudes, behavior with certain people Students observe and adapt their own beliefs, attitudes, and behavior with certain students.
Learning the social roles	Behaviors that are learned from expert others' influence in society	Teachers are a vital part of students' everyday life, and their connections run deep. Students learn through identification with teachers.

^aFrom *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*, by A. Bandura, 1997, Freeman.

A theoretical framework provides a measurement of the concept and process of implementation fidelity and is based on empirical research. The elements that can be measured for implementation fidelity are “adherence to content, coverage, frequency and duration, as well as moderators of intervention complexity, facilitation strategies, quality of delivery and participant responsiveness” (Carroll et al., 2007, p. 5). Complete adherence (fidelity) to an intervention in the content, frequency, duration, and coverage intended by the program results in high fidelity and better intervention results (Carroll et al., 2007). If adherence to content, frequency, duration, and coverage is inconsistent or only partially implemented, fidelity is low (Carroll et al., 2007). Some factors can

moderate the degree of adherence (fidelity) to intervention, including intervention complexity. The level of detail of an intervention or lack thereof can be the difference between high or low fidelity; Carroll et al. found that “simple but specific interventions are more likely to be implemented with high fidelity than overly complex or vague ones” (p. 5). Support strategies, including quality of delivery, can optimize implementation fidelity through monitoring, giving feedback, and training. Participation responsiveness moderates the success of implementation fidelity more than any other factor because if participants are not engaged in the process, the intervention will fail (Carroll et al., 2007). Adherence to and moderation of interventions are two measurable factors in the Carroll et al. framework for evaluating implementation fidelity that can provide schools with data to determine interventions’ success while providing data on refinement areas.

Summary

RTI, PBIS, and SEL are all intervention programs that aim to help students be more successful in school academically and behaviorally. Each program has facets that aim to help teachers and staff members with implementation, but some are more successful than others. RTI uses a three-tier approach that scaffolds interventions to ensure that students with the highest need are served with the most interventions. Researchers (Glover & DiPerna, 2007; VanDerHeyden et al., 2007) emphasized the importance of systematic implementation of the RTI program and leadership to support the process. When these elements are in place, the result is a sustainable RTI intervention program that guides teams in making the best decisions for students, and students receive the interventions that best fit their needs.

Similar to RTI, PBIS is a three-tier model that scaffolds interventions to support behavior needs for students. Noltemeyer et al. (2019) found that using an assessment tool helped with implementation because the assessment provided feedback on the interventions being utilized, which led to improved interventions for students and a clear process for providing these implementations for staff. Sugai and Horner (2020) discovered that using implementation stages and providing a process led to better implementation and sustainability. Noltemeyer et al. (2017) found that using a state-wide recognition system for PBIS programs aided schools in implementation because it provided criteria that helped schools meet the standards for the recognition system.

SEL programs help students develop social and emotional skills, increase relationship-building skills, and enhance school climate. The studies about SEL implementation revealed that measuring implementation and fidelity provided information to help students utilize the social-emotional skills in their daily lives (Anderson et al., 2020; Durlak et al., 2011). Training is vitally important before, during, and after the initial year of implementation for staff to have ownership in the program and implement it with fidelity (Noltemeyer et al., 2017). Durlak et al. (2011) showed that having a measurement tool to evaluate the implementation aided in improved implementation. All three interventions—RTI, PBIS, and SEL—have shown that a systematic approach to implementation, training, and evaluation of these programs leads to the program’s sustainability and ownership by all staff involved with implementation.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

This chapter provides a description of the research methodology and the components of the research design. First, I provide an overview of the problem, purpose, and research questions associated with this study. Then, I present the methodology and the research design chosen, including a rationale for these choices. Next, the study setting is detailed, followed by a description of the participants and the recruitment processes. The data collection and analysis methods are described, including an explanation and rationale for the methods chosen. The chapter ends with a discussion of the trustworthiness and the limitations associated with the study.

SEL programs are integrated into school curriculum to support both students' and staff members' well-being. These programs are important because students may struggle with academic achievement if their social and emotional needs are not acknowledged and addressed (Mergler et al., 2014). Various SEL programs are available to U.S. school districts. Unfortunately, researchers have reported a lack of systematic implementation of SEL programs, resulting in program implementation that lacks consistency, counters mandated requirements, and lacks systematic assessment and accountability (Landrum et al., 2019; Mergler et al., 2014). This lack of systematic implementation also leads to teachers struggling to meet students' SEL needs; students may have rigorous academic demands and emotions they struggle to regulate (Whitney & Candelaria, 2017).

Implementation of any program in a classroom is important to the success of the program.

Kindergarten teachers play a vital role in students' first experiences in school, so examining the implementation of a program, CharacterStrong, would provide important data missing in current SEL research studies. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how the words, actions, behavior patterns, and social roles of kindergarten teachers shape the implementation of the CharacterStrong program, an SEL program at one school in Texas. The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. How do kindergarten teachers describe the intentionality of their words and actions related to the CharacterStrong program?
2. How do kindergarten teachers' behavior patterns, related to SEL, manifest in the classroom during the CharacterStrong program implementation?
3. How do kindergarten teachers' social roles change their implementation of the CharacterStrong program?

Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative researchers “are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed; that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). Qualitative research is a process of finding the most effective solutions to practice-based problems or what innovations arise when organizations focus on sharing positive, appreciative stories among members (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The specified group of interest in this study was a group of kindergarten teachers in one school implementing the SEL CharacterStrong program.

Qualitative researchers collect data in the natural setting in which participants are accustomed to existing daily relevant to the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the current study, the natural setting included the kindergarten classrooms where the teachers implemented the CharacterStrong program.

A multifaceted approach to data collection is another hallmark of a qualitative study. This approach includes using a variety of ways to collect data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For the study, data were collected using three different methods related to the implementation of the CharacterStrong program: (a) teacher interviews, (b) classroom observations, and (c) program documents. In qualitative research, interviews and observations are critical because, as Creswell and Poth (2018) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) contended, the focus of the data collected and subsequent analysis highlights the participants' particular contextualized experiences and voices.

Research Design

The qualitative research design chosen for this study was an intrinsic case study. An intrinsic case employs exploration of a specified group or persons of interest (Yin, 2018). The intrinsic case study is designed to focus on a particular “case itself because the case itself presents an unusual or unique situation” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 99). Examining the CharacterStrong program from the perspectives of the study school's kindergarten teachers as implementors was a unique situation because these teachers brought their own background experiences, beliefs, and attitudes towards this new SEL program. Case studies contain boundaries to “determine the scope of data collection, and in particular, how [the researcher] will distinguish data about the subject [phenomenon] of the study from the data external to the case” (Yin, 2018, p. 31). In this case study, the

boundaries were the research location, the timeframe of the study, and the phenomenon explored. One school was the location of the study, specifically the kindergarten classroom. The timeframe of the data collection was February 2021 through April 2021. The phenomenon included the 1st-year implementation of the CharacterStrong program and the kindergarten teachers who implemented the program. The case, as defined, is presented in Figure 3.1.

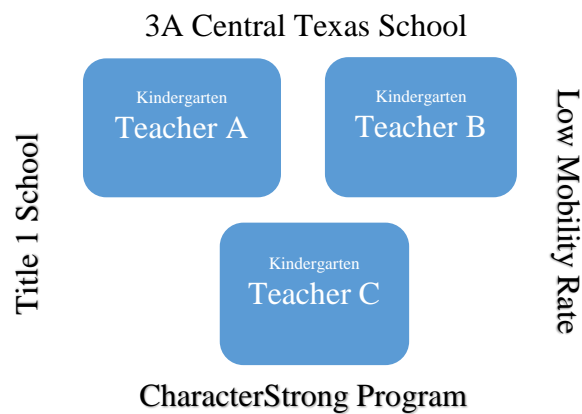


Figure 3.1. *Figure of the Case Defined*

Intrinsic case study methodology permits for reflection on the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study phenomenon was the teachers' classroom implementation of the CharacterStrong program and their beliefs about the program related to kindergarteners' SEL development. Using an intrinsic case study, the researcher analyzed how Bandura's (1977) social learning theory tenets manifested in the teachers' practices: learning by imitation, learning by identification, and social roles. The qualitative intrinsic case study data aided me in determining whether the tenets of the theory identified a shared pattern of behavior among the participants and whether a

pattern of behavior was observed among teachers implementing the CharacterStrong program (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Setting

The site selected for this study is a Central Texas school district, which is in a rural community growing at a steady rate. The specific campus selected for the study is a campus built in 2004 and serving prekindergarten through Grade 2. The campus includes 450 students with an ethnic composition of 72% White and 20% Hispanic students, with 32.8% of the student population considered economically disadvantaged (Texas Education Agency, 2019). The school district was established in 1889 and has deep roots in the community. The study school was the research site because it is the only school in the district that qualifies for Title I funds; has a low mobility rate of 5.2% (Texas Education Agency, 2019); and implements an SEL program, CharacterStrong. A Title I qualifying school with a low mobility rate was necessary for the research study because students at the study school campus do not move out of the district at a high rate.

Although student mobility is not an issue in this school, the students arrive at school with gaps in their development, both academically and socially-emotionally (Texas Education Agency, 2019). The CharacterStrong program was implemented to help fill the social-emotional gaps, supported by current research (CharacterStrong, 2020).

CharacterStrong is an SEL program established in 2018 by Kraft and Norwin. Kraft and Norwin are motivational speakers and kindness advocates who created the CharacterStrong program using the CASEL framework of five SEL competencies (CharacterStrong, 2020). The five competencies for SEL (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision making, and relationship skills) in

conjunction with 10 character traits (courage, perseverance, honesty, respect, gratitude, kindness, responsibility, cooperation, creativity, and empathy) make up the curriculum of the program (CharacterStrong, 2020).

Participants

The study included a total of three kindergarten teachers at one school. The number of participants reflects an appropriate number for an intrinsic case study based on Stake's (1995) explanation that the intrinsic approach should be used by researchers who have a genuine interest in the case and seek to better understand the particular case. In qualitative research, the selected participants should add importance and relevance to the study's intention, which is called purposeful sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2014). Purposeful sampling is when "the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore, must choose a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 66). The criteria for this study included teacher participants who (a) were certified kindergarten teachers at the study school, (b) represented various years of experience teaching kindergarten at the study school, and (c) were implementing the CharacterStrong program. These participants were closely tied to their implementation of CharacterStrong, and their words, actions, and behaviors related to the implementation process helped the researcher better understand the phenomenon and the teachers' experiences (see Stake, 1995).

Recruitment Process

After receiving the Baylor University Institutional Review Board approval, the superintendent of the study school district was contacted through email to provide information about the research study and ask for district site consent. Once the

superintendent provided district site approval, the principal of the study school was contacted to seek school site approval and to provide insight into who should be asked to participate. Once the principal provided approval, the researcher contacted potential participants through email to request their participation in the case study. The participants received a Participant Consent Form that informed them of the purpose of the research, the requirements of participation, and their rights to discontinue participation at any time. Participants could withdraw from the study without negative repercussions related to their standing as an employee for the district and school or related to the relationships between the researcher and the participant or between the participant and the principal. I also provided the time and space for prospective participants to ask questions before signing consent if needed.

Data Collection Methods

In this section, I detail the data collection decisions appropriate for an intrinsic case study inquiry. I first describe each data collection method and explain why the technique was appropriate. To answer the research questions associated with this study, I used interviews, observations, and artifacts as units of data. According to Yin (2018) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016), researchers employing case study research take advantage of the three data methods to go deeper into the phenomenon and the participants' experiences with the phenomenon.

The first method of data collection was semistructured interviews. Semistructured interviews are a mix of structured interview questions without predetermined wording or order and provide flexibility in all questions used, as advised by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). Two interviews were conducted with each participant. The interviews would be

conducted face to face unless COVID-19 restrictions prohibited such contact, in which case, virtual interviews would be conducted. The face-to-face interviews would occur in the teachers' classrooms midway through the 1st year of implementation of CharacterStrong and at the end of the 1st year of implementation. With this time frame, six total interviews were conducted over 4 months.

The interviews were conducted at the beginning of the research process and the end of the research process in order for the researcher to compare teachers' words, actions, and behaviors halfway through the implementation of CharacterStrong and at the end of the 1st year of implementation of CharacterStrong. Conducting these interviews face to face was the preferred interview mode for the subjects to be comfortable and in their natural state, which Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended for case studies.

These interviews followed interview guides, including a list of questions to be covered during the conversation (see Appendix A). The first interview established rapport and examined teachers' thoughts about the CharacterStrong program, the teachers' plan for implementation, and goals for using the program. Because the third tenet of social learning theory is learning by social roles, the second interview focused on guiding questions about the teachers' beliefs regarding their social roles in the classroom. The second interview also included questions about the information that emerged from the first interview. The researcher followed the semistructured interview protocols to "have the freedom to respond to the situation at hand, to the respondent's emerging worldview, and to address emerging ideas on the topic" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 111).

The second data collection method was direct observation of teachers implementing CharacterStrong lessons with their kindergarten students. The researcher

functioned in the role of an observer during the observations. This type of role is appropriate because in intrinsic case studies, the purpose is to observe the participants in relation to the phenomenon to better understand the participants and their experiences (Yin, 2018). Through direct observations, the researcher added new dimensions to the interview data to “help to convey important characteristics to outside observers” (Yin, 2018, p.122) about the implementation of CharacterStrong and how teachers’ words, actions, and behaviors manifest in their implementation. Teacher observations were conducted once for each teacher participant over the 3-month period. Each observation lasted 20 min. An observation protocol (see Appendix B) was used to secure data relevant to answer the research questions and to be consistent among all participants. In the first and second observation, the researcher focused on (a) how the teachers’ modeling manifested through their words, actions, and behaviors while implementing the CharacterStrong program and (b) how the teachers’ modeling affected students learning through imitation, which is the first tenet of Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory. The protocol also included the identification of behavior patterns by the teacher because the second tenet of Bandura’s social learning theory is how teacher behavior patterns emerge in the classroom. During the interviews, the researcher asked questions to identify teachers’ understanding of their social role in the class, which is the third tenet of social learning theory.

The final sources of data in this research study were program documents, which included the documents from the CharacterStrong program and the teachers’ forms in which they planned and implemented the lessons observed. The CharacterStrong-created documents were designed to guide teachers in the implementation process. The

implementation documents are divided into two guides. The first guide is an implementation plan for the school to use over the course of a year that guides the process and professional development and includes a rubric for reflection of the program implementation. The second guide for implementation is a calendar for teachers that divides the activities and lessons into a daily component with links to easily accessible resources. Documents can serve as pertinent pieces of information to help researchers understand the context in which the program has been implemented (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Including the physical documents from CharacterStrong and the teachers would help broaden my perspective of the program implementation and what was implemented by the teachers (see Yin, 2018). Table 3.1 shows the data collection types.

Table 3.1

Data Collection Types

Type of data	Participant	Process	Possible outcomes
Interview	Teachers	Semistructured interviews	Social learning theory Tenet 3: Learning by social roles
Observations	Teachers	One observation (20 min)	Social learning theory Tenets 1 and 2: Learning by imitation and identification
Artifacts	Researcher	Review documents used in the lesson and implementation process	Implementation plans analysis

Data Analysis

In this section, I detail the data analysis decisions appropriate for an intrinsic case study. I first describe the data analysis methods I used and explain why I selected them

and how they aligned with my research purpose. I conclude this section by describing the plan for conducting the data analysis.

This study used three cycles of coding during the analysis of data. The coding used was deductive coding or etic coding. Deductive coding is a method of coding where the researcher develops a draft list of codes prior to data collection (Miles et al., 2019). This list is based on the conceptual framework and the research questions guiding the study. The researcher created codes based on Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory, the conceptual framework informing the research questions and study design. The set of codes is presented in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2

Codes and Anticipated Sources

Category and subcategory	Data collection
Imitation	
Words	Interviews, observations, and artifacts
Actions	Interviews and observations
Behaviors	Observations
Identification	
Patterns	Observations
Students’ patterns	Observations
Social roles	
Awareness	Interviews and observations

The first step in data analysis was to review the audiotapes and compare the transcripts. The first time reviewing the audiotapes and transcripts was to complete an initial analytic memoing of the data to familiarize myself with the units of data collected. The second and third reviews consisted of cleaning up the transcripts by eliminating unnecessary utterances and repetitions. This transcript cleaning would provide more

reliable data to begin coding, which would aid in the confirmability of the data.

Confirmability is essential because the study should be able to be replicated in a clear sequence of data collection and processes (Miles et al., 2019).

The second step of data analysis was to begin first-cycle coding with the deductive codes. The deductive codes were used to categorize data obtained from interviews, classroom observations, and artifacts from the CharacterStrong program. The units of data were organized into the broad coding categories of imitation, identification, and social roles, which are based on the tenets of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. The third step consisted of the second cycle of coding. Once the data units were coded in the broad categories, the second cycle of coding organized the units of data into the anticipated subcategory within each general category, as shown in Table 3.2. Step 4 was the third and final coding cycle, which consisted of a holistic analysis of the units of data to identify patterns of meaning within each subcategory and pattern matching within each broad category. Figure 3.2 presents the four steps. All of the data units were stored using NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software.

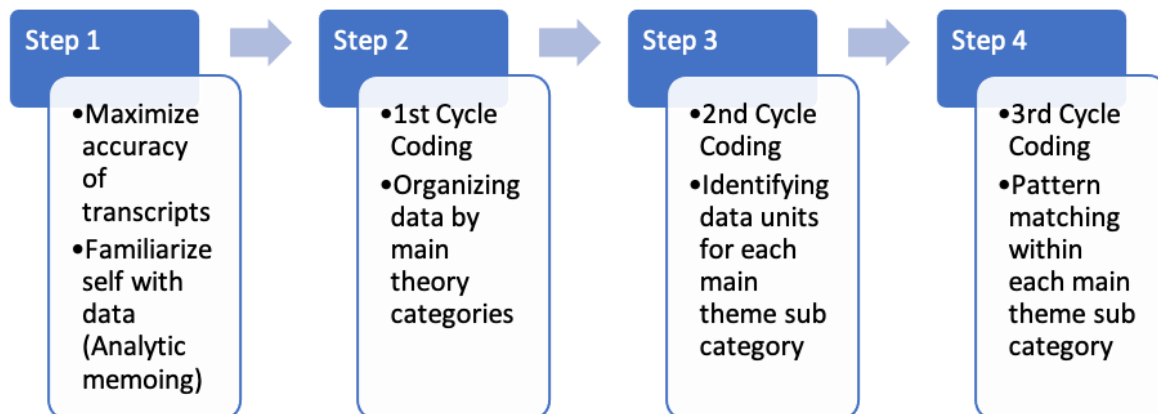


Figure 3.2. *Data Analysis Procedures*

Trustworthiness

I used various methods in this research study to establish trustworthiness in the research process. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that validity and reliability in a qualitative study can be “approached through careful attention to a study’s conceptualization and how data are collected, analyzed and interpreted, and the way in which the findings are presented” (p. 238). The trustworthiness of this research study is divided into four areas, as shown in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3

Proposed Methods to Establish Trustworthiness

Credibility	Transferability	Dependability	Confirmability
Methods of data collection - Triangulation	Case study size	Research design process	Triangulation of data
Ethics of the researcher - Participant safety	Audit trail	Recorded interviews Observation protocols	Member checks

The first area is credibility. Patton (2002) verified that four types of triangulation contribute to the validity of qualitative analysis. These triangulation types are methods triangulation, triangulation of sources, analyst triangulation, and theory triangulation (Patton, 2002). The methods used to collect data were through interviews, observations, and documents. Triangulation of these three methods would make the research more reliable and credible than a single data source (Yin, 2018). Using these data to converge the evidence “helps to strengthen the construct validity of [the] case study” (Yin, 2018, p. 128). Triangulation of sources includes using different teachers to gain various

perspectives. Using three different teachers increased the chances of understanding the CharacterStrong implementation more profoundly.

Recording the interviews and using observation protocols provided validity for data collection because the data would not be based on memory or notes. Rather, the data would be recorded, transcribed, and revised during the data analysis process. Observation protocols were used as a method for recording notes during the observation, based on the three research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Analyzing the data using these two techniques allowed for more validity in data. Using multiple sources or participants is another area of triangulation that ensures more substantial research data collection than one data source (Shenton, 2004; Yin, 2018).

Researcher ethics provides another piece of credibility to the research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher conducted the research in the most ethical way possible. There were no foreseen risks to the participants of the study. The participants were encouraged to be honest from the beginning of the study and could refuse to participate at any time (Shenton, 2004).

The next areas of trustworthiness are transferability and dependability. Transferability is the possibility that the research can be applied to another population. Dependability is based on how detailed the research study is in its processes, specifically in its design, implementation, data gathering, and reflection of the process (Shenton, 2004). A case study with a small number of participants, such as this one, applies to other case studies and therefore is trustworthy due to its transferability (Shenton, 2004). The researcher also kept an audit trail document to allow another researcher to retrace the process that led to the final findings in this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case

study, the research design and implementation are detailed, as well as the data analysis and the reflection of the process as discussed in Chapter 4.

The final area of trustworthiness is confirmability. Confirmability “is the qualitative investigator’s comparable concern to objectivity” (Shenton, 2004, p. 72), which means steps are taken to ensure the finding is based on the participants’ experiences and ideas and not those of the researcher. The researcher conducted member checks after the data collection. Member checks involve taking data and interpretations back to the participants, “so they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 261). Conducting member checks helped validate the participants’ information and ensure that nothing was missing from the data or interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Limitations

The study was limited in its scope because it was conducted at one school, in one grade level. The small sample of participants, the three teachers, represented only a small portion of people to implement the program. However, conducting a research study limited to one school and one grade level allowed for the data collection and analysis to go deeper with the case study design.

The researcher’s involvement and experience with the CharacterStrong program are a limitation to the research process as well. My understanding and knowledge of CharacterStrong create a bias towards the program because I had experience with the program prior to the research study. My knowledge and expertise with CharacterStrong also allowed me to have a vision of what the program is aimed to do and how to incorporate it into school as opposed to not having experience with the program.

Being the assistant principal at the school where the research is conducted is a limitation. My positionality as an assistant principal to the participants was addressed during the recruitment of participants by informing them that the researcher was not acting as their assistant principal during the research process and would not use any data from the research in the role of their evaluator. My research and their participation or nonparticipation would not hinder or advance my relationship with the participants or their professional standing as an employee for the district or school. As the assistant principal at the school, I have established relationships with the teachers that will participate in the study, which would allow for honest communication because they trust me.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explained the methodology used to conduct this study. The chapter included the research questions, a detailed account of the research design, site selection, participant selection, and data collection methods. The data collection methods outlined the data analysis process, trustworthiness, and limitations of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

This chapter describes the data analysis and findings from the research study conducted through an intrinsic case study of three kindergarten teachers' implementation of the SEL program, CharacterStrong, along with a review of the program artifacts and documents. The findings from the data analysis led to recommendations and implications for future research on SEL and its implementation in classrooms, described in Chapter Five.

Study Overview

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how the words, actions, and social roles of kindergarten teachers shape (influence) the implementation of CharacterStrong, an SEL program, at one Texas school. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do kindergarten teachers describe the intentionality of their words and actions related to the CharacterStrong program?
2. How do kindergarten teachers' behavior patterns, related to SEL, manifest in the classroom during the CharacterStrong program implementation?
3. How do kindergarten teachers' social roles change their implementation of the CharacterStrong program?

This study was an intrinsic case study focusing on the “case itself [e.g., evaluating a program] because the case itself presents an unusual or unique situation” (Creswell &

Poth, 2018, p. 99). Examining the CharacterStrong program from the perspectives of kindergarten teachers as implementors is a unique situation because teachers bring their own background experiences, beliefs, and attitudes to this new SEL program. Case studies contain boundaries to “determine the scope of data collection, and in particular, how [the researcher] will distinguish data about the subject [phenomenon] of the study from the data external to the case” (Yin, 2018, p. 31). In the case study, the boundaries were the research location, the timeframe of the study, and the phenomenon explored. Kindergarten classrooms in one school were the location of the study.

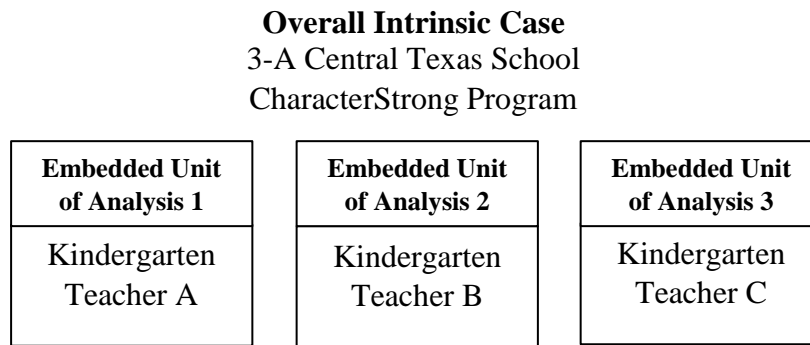


Figure 4.1. *Representation of the Intrinsic Case*

According to Yin (2018) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016), researchers employing case study research take advantage of the three data methods to go deeper into the phenomenon and the participants’ experiences with the phenomenon. The first method of data collection was semistructured interviews. To answer the research questions associated with this study, the researcher conducted interviews, completed observations, and examined artifacts. The researcher conducted two interviews per participant over 3 months. Each interview lasted an average of 20 min, totaling up to 2 hours of interviews. All interviews were recorded with the participants’ permission.

The second data collection method was direct observation of teachers implementing CharacterStrong lessons with their kindergarten students. Each participant was observed once, with each observation lasting 20 min. The researcher observed participants using a predetermined observation protocol (Appendix B) to guide data collection. The final data collection method used to guide the analysis was a review of the documents from the CharacterStrong program and the teachers' implementation of these documents. The CharacterStrong documents were designed to guide teachers in the implementation process and were authored by CharacterStrong.

This study used three cycles of coding during the analysis of data. The first cycle of coding was deductive coding or etic coding (Miles et al., 2019). Deductive coding is a method of coding where the researcher develops a list of potential codes prior to collecting data (Miles et al., 2019). This code list is based on the conceptual framework and the research questions that the study will examine. The researcher created codes based on Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, the conceptual framework that informed the research questions and study design. The set of codes used was presented in Table 3.2.

The data analysis consisted of four main steps. The first step of data analysis included multiple reviews of the transcripts. The second step of data analysis consisted of first cycle coding with the deductive codes (see Table 3.2). The deductive codes were used to categorize data obtained from interviews, classroom observations, and artifacts from the CharacterStrong program. The categories were aligned to the broad coding categories of imitation, identification, and social roles, based on Bandura's (1977) social learning theory.

The third data analysis step consisted of second-cycle coding. Once the data units were coded in the broad categories, the second cycle of coding organized the units of data into the anticipated subcategory within each general category (i.e., imitation-words, imitation-actions, imitation-behaviors, identification-patterns, identification-teachers, social roles-awareness). The fourth step of the data analysis process included the third and final coding cycle, in which the researcher conducted a holistic analysis to identify patterns of meaning within each subcategory and pattern matching within each broad category. During this coding cycle, inductive codes emerged from the data into subcategorical codes under the deductive codes based on Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory (see Table 4.2). These subareas emerged within the original code of identification-teachers: (a) intentionality of teachers’ words and actions and (b) teachers’ perceptions of students’ behavior, including identifying and modeling. All data units were stored using NVivo software.

Table 4.2

Deductive Analysis Codes That Emerged From the Data

Category: Identification	Subcategory	Areas	Data source
Identification-teachers	Intentionality of teachers	Actions Modeling & reasoning Words Modeling CharacterStrong materials Implementation	Interviews & CharacterStrong curriculum
	Perceptions of students’ behavior	Identifying Modeling	Interviews

Context

The site selected for this study is a Central Texas school district, a rural community growing at a steady rate. The specific campus chosen for the study is a prekindergarten through Grade 2 campus built in 2004, with 420 students enrolled. The CharacterStrong program was implemented to help fill students' social-emotional gaps as they begin their first years in school (CharacterStrong, 2020). The CharacterStrong program aims to help teachers implement planned SEL practices while assisting students in developing strategies to gain awareness and take responsibility for their emotions and actions. The CharacterStrong program provides a curriculum surrounding 10 character traits: courage, respect, perseverance, gratitude, honesty, kindness, empathy, responsibility, cooperation, and creativity. The program and provides implementation plans and a pre- and postassessment (Character Strong, 2020). SEL is defined as a process for developing social and emotional competencies in children. SEL's short-term goals are to promote student growth in the five core areas and improve student attitudes and beliefs about self and others (CASEL, 2020).

Participants

The participants in this study were three female, White kindergarten teachers at the study school. The participants ranged in experience from 1 to 15 years of teaching kindergarten. Julie has taught kindergarten for 15 years. Camryn is in her initial year of teaching kindergarten, whereas Jennifer has taught kindergarten for 4 years. Each participant completed two interviews. The first interview asked questions about the teachers' understanding of SEL and the CharacterStrong program (see Appendix A). After the first interview, the researcher observed the teacher implement a

CharacterStrong lesson in her classroom. The researcher used an observation protocol (see Appendix B) and took notes during the observation.

The second interview was conducted after the observation and asked questions about the observed lesson. After the interviews, the researcher assigned a pseudonym to the participant and transcribed the interviews. The researcher engaged in thematic coding and analysis of the qualitative data gleaned from participant interviews and the observation protocols.

Julie. Julie has 15 years of experience teaching kindergarten and has been at the study school for 8 years. Julie holds a bachelor's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies. At the beginning of the CharacterStrong implementation, Julie had doubts about implementing the program because she did not think she had enough time in the day to add another element to teaching. Although she was skeptical at the beginning of the implementation of CharacterStrong, Julie now sees the importance of implementing the program in the classroom after this pilot year. Julie commented on the importance of students understanding the vocabulary surrounding the character traits. She made it her goal "to build on the vocabulary that we're learning from CharacterStrong. . . I want them to know what those words mean and how to implement it in the classroom and outside of the classroom." Julie embedded the vocabulary from CharacterStrong in her lessons daily, which helped students understand and use the vocabulary in their social interactions.

Camryn. Camryn is in her 1st year of teaching kindergarten. She holds a bachelor's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies. Camryn was eager to implement the CharacterStrong program with her students. She wanted to make sure she did it right and

desired feedback to help her implement it. Camryn noticed students were more aware of their behavior during implementation, and she was more aware of her behavior than she thought she would be. During her interview, she commented that her students were implementing character traits outside of school in sports:

Even one of my boys was saying that, at practice, he was going to help the other boy learn how to catch the ball on the ground. They're trying to apply it to the outside world as well, which I think is big.

Camryn also found value in the program; she said, "I try to be excited for it and show that we are going to learn a lot today by using CharacterStrong, and I try to be really positive." Camryn's enthusiasm and openness to feedback allowed her to see the benefits of incorporating SEL into her teaching practices, providing the best learning environment for her students.

Jennifer. Jennifer is in her 4th year of teaching kindergarten. She holds a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education. Jennifer was not as talkative as the other participants during her interviews; however, she found the CharacterStrong program beneficial for her students. She particularly liked an activity she did with her students:

We talked about what that negative feeling might be. And I gave an example, then they were giving me examples, and then they had to color a balloon every time they let go of a negative emotion and thought of a positive emotion.

This practice helped students work through their emotions, creating conversations about how they feel when frustrated, angry, or happy. A few students in Jennifer's class struggled with regulating their emotions and resorted to crying, yelling, or throwing fits. As she progressed through implementing CharacterStrong, she found students were easier to calm and talk through their emotions.

Findings

This section explains the main findings based on the categories used to code the data deductively. These categories were based on Bandura's (1977) social learning theory that includes three areas: (a) learning by imitation, (b) learning by identification, and (c) learning by social roles. Within each of these categories, subcategories emerged. Each subcategory is defined and explained in the following sections and supported with data organized by topics reflecting nuances of meaning within the subcategory.

Social learning theory is the idea that students learn best through role models or experiences within a classroom. Bandura (1977) theorized behavior patterns were created based on experiences with role models in school unconsciously without intention (Raičević et al., 2017). There are three central tenets of social learning theory, as noted earlier. Learning by imitation is when students learn through imitations of words, actions, and behaviors in the classroom. Learning by identification are conscious social behavior patterns students are exposed to during time spent with their teacher. Learning by social roles is based on teacher awareness of their influence on students through their gestures, speech, beliefs, actions, and status in society.

Imitation

Learning by imitation is when teachers and students learn through imitation of words, actions, and behaviors. Bandura (1977) defined this imitation as “learning in which certain behavior, adopted by emulation . . . imitates the behavior of the model” (p. 83). Through their gestures and speech, the teacher participants influenced others in the classroom setting. Students spend 7–8 hours a day with their teachers and are exposed to

their speech and how they model behaviors and interactions with students and other adults.

The research study was designed for one 20-min observation per participant to collect data on learning by imitation, which was based on how teacher behavior manifests in the classroom. The study included an observation protocol focused on teachers' word choice, tone, and body language while implementing a CharacterStrong activity. The researcher collected data using the observation protocol; the researcher then applied coding based on the learning by imitation theoretical framework to analyze the data. During the coding process, the data did not reveal any categories that supported explicit teacher behaviors that manifested in the classroom. There was not enough time in the single observation to see a pattern of behavior manifest in the classroom. More observations are needed to collect data patterns that show how teachers' behaviors manifest in the classroom to extend this study.

Identification

The second tenet of social learning theory is learning by identification. Learning by identification is a conscious social behavior because it is based on behavior patterns, not solely imitation. Bandura (1977) explained, "Behavior patterns are adopted spontaneously, without conscious intention and efforts to influence the behavior of others" (p. 84). Students were exposed to their teacher's behavior patterns in the classroom setting. Unintentionally, students observe and adapt their attitudes and behaviors according to the teacher's behavior patterns.

During the research study, the participants described the intentionality of their words and behaviors in the two interviews. The main subcategories of identification were

(a) teachers’ intentionality of their actions, (b) teachers’ intentionality of their words, and (c) teachers’ perception of students’ behavior. Two topics emerged under the subcategory of teachers’ intentionality of their actions: modeling and reasoning. One topic emerged under the subcategory of teachers’ intentionality of their words: modeling. Two topics emerged under the subcategory of teachers’ perceptions of student behavior: identifying and modeling (see Table 4.3).

Table 4.3

Deductive Category of Identification-Teacher: Subcategories and Topics

Subcategory	Code	Topics
Intentionality of actions	Modeling	How to respond to and treat others <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher to student • Student to student • Teacher to teacher
	Reasoning	Explaining actions through the curriculum as teachable moments Using the CharacterStrong program materials
Intentionality of words	Modeling	Word choice, tone, CharacterStrong vocabulary
Student behaviors	Identifying	Socially Academically
	Modeling	Leadership roles Peer relationships

Identification: Teachers’ intentionality of actions. During the interviews, teachers described the intentionality of their actions as they implemented CharacterStrong in the classroom with students. In intentionality of actions, two subcategories emerged from the data: modeling and reasoning. Topics emerged under the subcategories modeling and reasoning. Within the modeling subcategory, teachers described modeling how to

respond to and treat others through teacher–student, student–student, and teacher–teacher interactions (see Table 4.3).

Teachers described modeling appropriate behaviors, using teacher-to-student interactions to teach the CharacterStrong traits. For example, teachers described their interactions with students where they modeled how to treat others during their interaction with students. Julie explained,

If I'm showing kindness, they're going to follow and show kindness. If I'm being honest with them, they're going to be honest with me. So, I think it's a two-way street. They're always watching. Always.

Julie understands students are always watching how she behaves, so she must be intentional with her actions.

Teachers acknowledged when students modeled appropriate behavior during student-to-student interactions. Jennifer used students as examples to model behaviors:

A lot of times I'll bring two students up to the front of the room, or I'll bring a few students up and show examples. If this person does this to this one. And I try to use them because they're more interested when their friend is up there and when they can see, "Okay, this person was sad."

Jennifer used students to show how to work through potential interactions, modeling the correct way to interact. She acknowledged that students identified appropriate behavior by seeing their friends model the behavior in student-to-student interactions.

During the interviews, teachers described intentionally modeling character traits while interacting with peer teachers. Camryn discussed what the other teachers have done related to kindness and recognized that her class sees the teachers modeling kindness:

They [the students] see that we also rely on each other and that that's kind of her to come help me or the other way around. If I go over there, my class knows we use each other as resources. We respect each other and are there to help each other; that's what they need to do with one another as well.

Camryn is aware that her communication with other adults models the behavior she wants her students to emulate.

Within the category of intentionality of actions, the first subcategory, as described, was modeling. The second subcategory was reasoning. Two topics developed within reasoning: explaining actions and using the CharacterStrong curriculum as teachable moments. In these two topics, teachers described the reasons behind their actions in the classroom and described providing opportunities for students to engage in CharacterStrong traits by using the CharacterStrong curriculum. These examples were found during the interview process with the participants and the review of the CharacterStrong program materials.

The teachers explained the reasoning behind rewarding students who model CharacterStrong traits. They used positive office referrals and classroom rewards and praised students who were doing the right thing in front of the class. Julie described how she engages students in cooperation, a CharacterStrong trait, when they work together to earn a compliment:

A big thing is when we get our compliments in the hallway to fill our compliment jar. I always tell them if one person is talking or out of line or making a big deal out there, then that's a chance that we will not get a compliment from somebody walking by. That's been a big one for them to see that the whole group has to be participating and working towards a common goal rather than only a few people.

Julie combined a classroom-management technique she had used for years to teach the character trait cooperation in a tangible way that provided students with extrinsic motivation to work together to earn a reward.

Teachers described the intentionality of their actions while using the curriculum to allow students to engage in CharacterStrong traits in the classroom. The participants explained the lessons they selected were ones they wanted all students to participate in;

the lessons need to be tangible for a kindergarten student to understand and apply to their day-to-day interactions. Camryn rationalized intentionally using the curriculum during different times of the day, like during morning circle and after an incident that affected two or more students for students to be able to reflect on their behavior during the moment. She intentionally used the curriculum before recess to reinforce the character trait they were working on for the month: “We talk about ways to show kindness and ways to show perseverance if there’s something out there that we can’t learn, how to swing or something like that.” Camryn supports the lessons from the CharacterStrong curriculum during unstructured social interactions between her students. Utilizing teachable moments to apply CharacterStrong character traits was how the participants described the reasoning behind their actions in the classroom. One of the participants explained the reasoning behind modeling her actions in class. Camryn used her interactions with students to serve as a model:

I also have to model it. And whenever I see someone doing something, I’ll say, “That was really nice of this person because they helped this friend pick up all the balls outside,” or “When this friend fell, they asked them if they were okay.” I have to really be attentive to when it’s [a character trait] being shown and point that out so that they can put that action with that word and remember how to use it.

Camryn was consciously aware of looking for ways to model the character traits provided from the CharacterStrong program in everyday interactions, explicitly using words and actions.

Participants explained the reasoning behind their actions when interacting with students and during teachable moments that presented themselves during class. For example, Camryn explained that the lessons and intentionality of teaching character traits

built a culture in the classroom where students were aware of how their actions affect others:

I've seen it [CharacterStrong program] build their relationships in [the classroom], and I've seen them learn how to be more of a friend to one another and include one another. I think it's important that I'm recognizing that I'm teaching it, and that I'm seeing them use it.

Camryn was aware of incorporating CharacterStrong in her classroom and the powerful positive relationships created among peers in her room.

The CharacterStrong program materials were also reviewed as a piece of data for the study. The CharacterStrong program materials are housed on the CharacterStrong website. Each participant had access to the website and logged in using a username and password. On the site, the program content is organized by character traits. An overview explains the organization of all the materials and the S.E.R.V.E. model (Start Intentionally, Engage Rationally, Respond with Empathy, Values Practiced Consistently, and Exit Intentionally). The site offers a timeline to introduce a character trait each month of the school year. Within each character trait, materials are organized by classroom grade levels (prekindergarten, kindergarten through Grade 2, Grades 3–5), with additional categories of Home Resources, Staff Challenges, Playground Resources, and Reading Lists. Inside the Classroom section, the materials are housed within each part of the S.E.R.V.E. model. Start Intentionally provides resources to begin the week, month, or day related to the character trait. Engage Rationally contains activities where students connect, engage, and play related to the character trait. Respond with Empathy provides ideas to meet students where they are with their social-emotional and physical needs, including mindfulness ideas and brain breaks. Values Practiced Consistently has resources that bring the abstract character traits into concrete experiences or discussions

that aid in student understanding. Exit Intentionally provides teachers with a way to summarize and close out the month consistently.

The teachers in the study used the Start Intentionally and Values Practiced Consistently sections in their classrooms. During the participant interviews, the theme of time and implementation of materials emerged. Camryn explained that she was worried that she would not have enough time to implement CharacterStrong during the school day, but the more comfortable she became with using the resources, the easier it was to make time for the materials. She explained, “I’ve learned that you introduce it one day, another day you can do a little video. . . . You can do a hands-on activity the next day.” Camryn found the program resources helpful when she scaffolded the materials over a week. Julie also mentioned that at first, she felt like she would not have time to utilize all the resources that CharacterStrong provided. However, she stated, “Monday, I’m going to introduce it. . . . Tuesday, we’re going to review and go over it. After I did that, I was like, ‘Oh, this really isn’t that bad.’ I just had to make a time for it and do it.”

Julie also found that scaffolding the materials and making time for SEL were vital in implementing the program materials. Jennifer used the compliment circle, an activity from CharacterStrong. She found her students requested this activity throughout the year after she had stopped using it due to time restraints: “We stopped doing the compliment circle, because it just took a while. And they asked me for the longest time if we could do it again, so we did.” Jennifer found that students benefited from this activity, so she had to be intentional and make time for it during the school day.

Identification: Teachers’ intentionality of words. The topics under the identification of teachers showed teachers intentionally used their words while speaking

with students. The intentionality of their words was presented to students through modeling word choice, tone of voice, and implementing vocabulary from CharacterStrong during their interactions with others. The participants described modeling how to speak to others before an activity, using role-playing scenarios, and offering a replacement behavior or word choice when students are in conflict. Julie shared that before a CharacterStrong lesson, she explained to the class how students would help each other through their words: “We talked about it before we did it. We said, we’re going to use kind words. And if we need help, we’re going to ask for it and just help each other.” This intentionality frontloaded students with clear expectations on how to speak to one another.

Camryn explained a lesson she used from the CharacterStrong curriculum that explicitly taught students how words could hurt others:

I made one big heart and I had them raise their hands. . . . They told me something that upset them in the past. Something that made them feel sad. And we folded the heart, for everything that made them feel sad. And then we opened it and we said, “The words that you use can hurt a person. And it makes an impact on them.”

Camryn had students reflect on their experiences with hurtful words and showed what hurtful words do by using the curriculum in a powerful way. Jennifer described how she reminds students to use their words to work through conflict:

“Okay, go talk to your friend about it first, and then come talk to me.” And then usually they’re able to talk it out, but then I do talk to them afterwards just to make sure it was solved, and everything is okay.

The participants found value in using the vocabulary from the program and pointing out when students use the vocabulary to express their feeling and actions.

Teachers’ perception of student behavior. A subcategory emerged under the category of identification of teachers: perception of student behavior. This subcategory

included identifying and modeling. Identifying is when the participants in the study described students identifying character traits from CharacterStrong while interacting socially and academically. Modeling is when participants in the study described students modeling the character traits through their behavior and interactions with others, which led to strong leadership skills and the ability to form peer relationships.

A teacher noticed students were using the character traits during social, play-based interactions. Jennifer described students telling her about their examples throughout the day: “Students come up to me and say, ‘Oh look, I’m showing cooperation. Me and a friend made up a dance together,’ or ‘Me and a friend built this tower together.’” Julie identified students’ behaviors on the playground: “I started seeing it on the playground and things when somebody was hurt, and they would all go and try to say, ‘I know you’re sad because you were hurt, but it’s okay.’” Teachers noticed that students were embedding the character traits while on the playground and comforting each other instead of going straight to the teacher. Camryn also saw students modeling traits from CharacterStrong during their interactions on the playground. She described,

One of the little girls, she came up to me and she said, “I just showed perseverance because I haven’t been able to swing, and I kept trying, and I’m doing better, and I can almost swing as high as so-and-so.”

Camryn found students modeling the character traits through the vocabulary and actions.

The teachers identified that students were using the character traits during social interactions and during their time in the classroom. Camryn described students using the character trait cooperation after a lesson:

I saw students carried a bin back to its cubby; they each have a little side of it and said, “We’re cooperating.” They want me to see. Even if the job probably could be done by one person, they’re trying to do it together.

Camryn noticed that students knew what the character trait cooperation means in their daily classroom lives and communicated this to their teacher.

Teachers also saw students use the character traits when reflecting on their academic success. Julie referenced one student's progression through the year of understanding the character trait:

He might not be able to say *perseverance*, but he says, "I kept trying, I kept trying, I didn't give up." Today, he went and read and he said, "I sounded it out. And I tried, and I tried until I got it."

Julie recognized the student was employing a CharacterStrong trait without using the actual CharacterStrong terminology.

Under the category of teacher perception of student behavior, the subcategory of modeling emerged. Modeling is when participants in the study described students modeling the character traits through their behavior and interactions with others. The topics under modeling that emerged were students modeling leadership roles and students modeling relationships. The participants noticed students began to take on leadership roles in response to the CharacterStrong lessons. Camryn reflected that after one of her lessons on cooperation, she was surprised at some of the leaders who emerged:

I think there were some leadership roles that surprised me. I wasn't expecting some of them to take charge like they did. . . . They helped establish this is how we need to do it. Then, everyone else jumped on board, and they went along with their idea or their thought.

Teachers observed students were becoming leaders as the CharacterStrong lessons progressed and modeled how to act as a leader in class.

Julie observed students modeling the character traits that ultimately created stronger friendships. One student was playing basketball with another student and needed help. Julie said, "One of them [student] was like, 'I'll teach you how to dribble the

basketball like me.’ And so I see them getting things out of it [CharacterStrong], and they’re building close friendships with it as well.” Relationships were created by students modeling kindness and empathy. Camryn observed that after teaching the character trait honesty, students communicated more often about their home lives with each other. Camryn said, “I think that’s just something that this age level, they open up about [home life experiences]. Because they don’t really know, I shouldn’t tell that, or I should tell that. So, they’re really honest with each other.” Students modeled honesty through class discussions of problems or emotions they experienced at home and did not know how to process. Teachers saw that the CharacterStrong program and traits provided opportunities for students to understand that they are not alone in their feelings and emotions; through the program, the classroom served as a place for all students in the class to process how to manage emotions, creating the ability to form peer relationships.

Under the category of identification, the main subcategories were (a) teachers’ intentionality of their actions, (b) teachers’ intentionality of their words, and (c) teachers’ perception of students’ behavior. Two topics emerged under the subcategory of teachers’ intentionality of their actions: modeling and reasoning. In these topics, the teachers described modeling student-to-teacher, student-to-student, and teacher-to-teacher interactions. Teachers also described the reasoning behind their actions in the classroom and using the CharacterStrong curriculum to provide teachable moments.

Two topics emerged under the subcategory of teachers’ perceptions of student behavior: identifying and modeling. One topic emerged under the subcategory of teachers’ intentionality of their words: modeling. Teachers described modeling word choice, tone, and vocabulary from CharacterStrong. Teachers described students

identifying traits from CharacterStrong during both social and academic interactions. Teachers also found that students modeled character traits during their actions, strengthened their leadership skills, and formed peer relationships.

Social Roles

Bandura's (1977) third and final tenet of social learning theory is learning by social roles. Teacher awareness of their influence on students through their gestures, speech, beliefs, actions, and status in society is another aspect of educating students (Raičević et al., 2017). During the research study, participants reflected on their social roles in the classroom and the amount of time they spend with students. The teachers explained their understanding of their beliefs' influence in implementing the program and their status as the teacher and leader of the class. Teachers felt they could empower their students by using the CharacterStrong traits and activities, or they could continue to focus on academics and ignore the social-emotional issues students in kindergarten experience.

The participants in the study were aware of how their social roles influenced the implementation of the program. All participants realized that the adults in the building influence students' SEL, including classroom teachers, specialist teachers, or counselors; all adults who interact with students at school have a social role that influences how students act. Julie described her thoughts on teaching CharacterStrong:

I feel like it's everyone on the campus's job to teach it [CharacterStrong], not just the counselor's job, because you can have a situation in music or in library or anywhere. And I feel like, I mean, any teacher would benefit to know about CharacterStrong, because it's great.

Julie's rationalization that all adults can influence student behavior exemplifies

Bandura's (1977) theory that social roles affect student behavior.

Camryn also commented on the responsibility of adults in the building to influence students' social-emotional behavior: "I definitely think it's something that needs to happen in the classroom, whether we know we're doing it or not. You're teaching them how to interact, so I don't think it should just be the counselor." Camryn acknowledged that her role as a teacher and leader in the class and on her team could empower the students' understanding of SEL vital to their well-being.

The participants also realized they needed to believe in the program before implementing it. Camryn discovered that the CharacterStrong lessons had the impact to help students emotionally before it would help them academically:

I realized that those are things that you really do have to meet the student where they are and figure out, make sure that they're learning those traits and different things with that before they can actually learn $2 + 2$ or how to add or subtract or things like that.

As a 1st-year teacher, Camryn had not been exposed to the importance of SEL in her undergraduate studies. Through the implementation of CharacterStrong, she learned how students could not thrive academically without the support of their social-emotional needs. Julie described her influence over students' receptivity to the lessons, "If I don't believe it's going to work, then the kids would know, and I would never do it, but I do believe it's working, and that's why we do it." Being a 15-year kindergarten teacher, Julie had an idea about the impact of SEL but did not make it a priority until CharacterStrong was a district initiative. She knew she had to believe in the program before she could expect her students to.

Jennifer also described the power of her belief in the program for it to work, which is influenced by her social role in school. She explained,

I think we should have had something like this a long time ago. Because there's, you know, kids that we see that needed this vocabulary needed something

concrete to show them. And we didn't have that to show, we just had our words or a book, and a lesson. It's just not—it wasn't the same.

Jennifer also experienced the impact that implementing CharacterStrong into her classroom had; she found that the program was a practical guide on how to teach students how to interact, the vocabulary that identifies character traits, and the influence actions and words have on others.

Under the identification tenant of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, the categories that emerged were intentionality of actions, intentionality of words, and teacher identification of student behaviors. The topics within the intentionality of actions were modeling and reasoning; teachers described modeling their actions during teacher-to-student, student-to-student, and teacher-to-teacher interactions. Teachers described reasoning of their actions in the classroom, during teachable moments with students, and when they used the CharacterStrong program materials through scaffolding materials and being intentional with time. Teachers described the intentionality of words through modeling word choice and tone and using CharacterStrong vocabulary during classroom interactions. Teachers identified student behavior patterns during social and academic interactions. Teachers also described students modeling behaviors through leadership roles and within peer relationships.

Conclusion

This chapter described the study overview, context of the research study, participant profiles, the data analysis, and the findings from the study. Bandura's (1977) theoretical framework on social learning theory provided inductive and deductive data in the research study. The categories that emerged during the data analysis were imitation, identification, and social roles. Imitation, specifically learning by imitation, was defined

as teachers and students learning through imitation of others' words, actions, and behaviors. During the coding process, the data from the observation protocols did not reveal any categories that supported clear teacher behaviors that manifested in the classroom, which would have been learning by imitation. The researcher concluded that more observations were needed for data to emerge about teachers' behaviors manifesting in the classroom.

Identification, specifically learning by identification, was defined as a conscious social behavior because it is based on behavior patterns, not solely imitation. Three main codes emerged from the data that fit under identification: (a) teachers' intentionality of their actions through modeling and reasoning, (b) teachers' intentionality of their words through modeling, and (c) teachers' perception of students' behavior through identifying and modeling.

Lastly, social roles were examined in the research study. Social roles are defined as teacher awareness of their influence on students through their gestures, speech, beliefs, actions, and status in society. The codes that emerged from the data under social roles were how teacher social roles affected the program's implementation and how teachers' beliefs about the program affected the implementation.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Chapter Five is organized to review the problem of practice regarding kindergarten teachers' implementation of the CharacterStrong Program and the intentionality of their actions during implementation. This chapter summarizes the research and discusses the conclusions based on the findings from the literature review and intrinsic case study, along with recommendations for future research and proposed action for future implementation of SEL programs. The purpose of the study and research questions are reviewed, followed by an overview of the research methodology, methods, and findings from the research. Finally, the significance of the study is explained, and the implications for classroom teachers and recommendations for future research are shared.

Study Overview

Schools are responsible for their students' academic growth, including developing their social and emotional skills (Whitney & Candelaria, 2017). Students' social and emotional foundation begins at an early age, making the youngest students a critical target for interventions to teach them the emotional competencies required to navigate conflict in school (CASEL, 2020; Hall & Bacon, 2005). Students often come to school lacking educative experiences (Dewey, 2008) in explicit social skills. Because of the lack of educative experiences, students frequently struggle to self-regulate and express their emotional needs (Landrum et al., 2019; Mergler et al., 2014).

Teachers, too, struggle to provide the educative experiences that address this lack of social awareness in students and inadvertently influence students through their own words, actions, and behaviors (Raičević et al., 2017). The reasons for teachers' pedagogical struggles include academic demands, a lack of clear expectations and program guidelines, and other duties required of them (Landrum et al., 2019). Teachers influence the systematic implementation of any program they teach students through their words, actions, behavior patterns, and understanding of their social roles (Bandura, 1977). It is critical to know more about the systematic implementation of SEL programs and teachers' awareness of how they affect the implementation.

Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how the words, actions, and social roles of kindergarten teachers shape (influence) the implementation of CharacterStrong, an SEL program. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do kindergarten teachers describe the intentionality of their actions and words related to the CharacterStrong program?
2. How do kindergarten teachers' behavior patterns, related to SEL, manifest in the classroom during the CharacterStrong program implementation?
3. How do kindergarten teachers' social roles change their implementation of the CharacterStrong program?

This study was an intrinsic case study focusing on the “case itself [e.g., evaluating a program] because the case itself presents an unusual or unique situation” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 99). Case studies contain boundaries to “determine the scope of data collection, and in particular, how [the researcher] will distinguish data about the subject [phenomenon] of the study from the data external to the case” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.

99). In this case study, the boundaries were the research location, the timeframe of the study, and the phenomenon being explored. Examining the CharacterStrong program from the perspectives of kindergarten teachers as implementors was a unique situation, because these teachers brought their own background experiences, beliefs, and attitudes to this new SEL program.

Three kindergarten teachers from one school participated in this study. The participants were all White women, ranging in years of experience from 1 to 15 years of teaching kindergarten. At the time of the study, Julie had taught kindergarten for 15 years, Camryn was in her 1st year of teaching kindergarten, and Jennifer had taught kindergarten for 4 years.

To answer the research questions associated with this study, the researcher conducted interviews, observations, and examined artifacts. According to Yin (2018) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016), researchers employing case study research take advantage of at least three data collection methods to go deeper into the phenomenon and the participants' experiences with the phenomenon. The first method of data collection in this study was semistructured interviews. The researcher conducted two interviews per participant, over 3 months. In the second data collection method, the researcher observed the teacher participants implementing CharacterStrong lessons with their kindergarten students three different times. The final data collection method used to guide the analysis included documents from the CharacterStrong program, such as activities provided on the CharacterStrong website. The CharacterStrong documents were designed to guide teachers in the implementation process and were authored by CharacterStrong.

The researcher used coding cycles during the analysis of data. The first cycle of coding was deductive coding or etic coding (Miles et al., 2019). The a priori code list was based on Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, the conceptual framework that informed the research questions and study design. The researcher engaged in thematic coding and analysis of the qualitative data gleaned from participant interviews and the observation protocols. To ensure reliability (Welsh, 2002), the transcribed interviews were uploaded in NVivo for coding and analysis.

Based on the analysis, three main themes emerged from the study: (a) teachers' intentionality of their actions and words, (b) teachers' perceptions of students' behavior, and (c) teachers' social roles influencing the implementation of CharacterStrong. In the theme of learning by identification, the participants discussed the intentionality of their actions and words through modeling and reasoning. In the theme of learning by identification, the participants discussed their perceptions of student behavior through identifying and modeling. The final theme of learning through social roles included the participants' perceptions of how social roles influenced the implementation of the CharacterStrong program.

Conclusions

Conclusions from the research study and data analysis are organized by the three research questions that guided the study. The data analysis and resolutions for each research question are provided, along with connections to empirical research provided in the literature review in Chapter Two. Implications for educators, based on the findings from this study and future research needs, conclude this section.

Research Question 1: How Do Kindergarten Teachers Describe the Intentionality of Their Action and Words Related to the CharacterStrong Program?

Three main conclusions emerged from the findings in answering how the teacher participants described the intentionality of their actions and words related to the CharacterStrong program. First, teachers described the intentionality of their actions by modeling and reasoning. Second, teachers described the intentionality of their words through tone, word choice, and modeling vocabulary. Third, teachers described their perception of students' behavior through identifying and modeling. The following sections present discussion of each conclusion and comparison to the current research in the field.

Teacher modeling actions and words. The kindergarten teachers described the intentionality of their actions in the classroom by modeling behaviors that represent the character traits from the CharacterStrong program when teaching and interacting with students. They also described the intentionality of the classroom actions by justifying the reasoning behind their efforts in the classroom. Camryn rationalized intentionally using the curriculum during different times of the day, like during morning circle and after an incident that affected two or more students for students to be able to reflect on their behavior during the moment. She intentionally used the curriculum before recess to reinforce the character trait students were working on for the month: “We talk about ways to show kindness and ways to show perseverance if there’s something out there that we can’t learn—how to swing or something like that.” Camryn supports the lessons from the CharacterStrong curriculum during unstructured social interactions between her students.

Kindergarten students learn best through concrete and tangible actions, which aid their understanding of an abstract concept such as empathy (CharacterStrong, 2019). The

kindergarten teachers modeled the behaviors from the CharacterStrong program so students could connect an action to a character trait. One of the participants explained the reasoning behind modeling her actions in class. Camryn used her interactions with students to serve as a model:

I also have to model it. And whenever I see someone doing something, I'll say, "That was really nice of this person because they helped this friend pick up all the balls outside," or "When this friend fell, they asked them if they were okay." I have to really be attentive to when it's [a character trait] being shown and point that out, so that they can put that action with that word and remember how to use it.

Camryn was consciously aware of looking for ways to model the character traits provided from the CharacterStrong program in everyday interactions, explicitly using words and actions.

The kindergarten teachers described being intentional in modeling word choice, controlling tone of voice, and implementing vocabulary from CharacterStrong during their interactions with others. The participants described modeling how to speak to others before an activity, using role-playing scenarios to teach appropriate word choice when students experienced conflict. One participant, Julie, shared that before a CharacterStrong lesson, she explained to the class how students would help each other through their words: "We talked about it before we did it. We said, we're going to use kind words. And if we need help, we're going to ask for it and just help each other." This intentionality frontloaded students with clear expectations on how to speak to one another. Due to the teacher participants' modeling the desired words, they found value in using the vocabulary from the program and acknowledging when students used the vocabulary to express their feeling and actions. Camryn explained a lesson she used from the CharacterStrong curriculum that explicitly taught students how words could hurt others:

I made one big heart, and I had them raise their hands. . . . They told me something that upset them in the past, something that made them feel sad. And we folded the heart for everything that made them feel sad. And then we opened it, and we said, “The words that you use can hurt a person. And it makes an impact on them.”

Camryn had students reflect on their experiences with hurtful words and showed what hurtful words do by using the curriculum in a powerful way. Intentionally modeling vocabulary from CharacterStrong helped students communicate with frontloaded communication skills and provided clear expectations on how to speak to one another.

It makes sense that the kindergarten teachers relied on modeling actions and words that represented character traits from CharacterStrong, given the recent research on SEL programs. Anderson et al. (2020) conducted a large-scale research study that examined the fidelity of implementing the SEL program, Conscious Discipline, in early childhood programs. Anderson et al. found that executive function skills are more susceptible to environmental factors in the early stages of childhood development. During this stage, students learn how to self-regulate through modeling by teachers, so not only do students learn how to manage their thoughts and feelings, but teachers do as well (Anderson et al., 2020).

Teachers modeling words and actions while implementing CharacterStrong aligns with the findings that both teachers and students learn how to self-regulate their thoughts and feelings through modeling. The conclusion that modeling proved essential for these teachers aligns with the weight Bandura (1997) placed on modeling in his social learning theory. One of Bandura’s social learning theory tenets is learning by identification, which is when the intentionality of teachers’ words and actions is purposeful and allows students to identify with these intentions.

Teachers' perception of student behavior. Kindergarten teachers also described the perception of students' behavior through identification. The teachers in the study described students identifying character traits from CharacterStrong while interacting with others. Students internalized character traits and used them in play-based and academic interactions in class. Jennifer described students telling her examples throughout the day: "Students come up to me and say, 'Oh look, I'm showing cooperation. Me and a friend made up a dance together,' or 'Me and a friend built this tower together.'" Julie identified students' behaviors on the playground: "I started seeing it on the playground and things when somebody was hurt, and they would all go and try to say, 'I know you're sad because you were hurt, but it's okay.'" Teachers noticed students were embedding the character traits while playing on the playground and comforting each other instead of going straight to the teacher.

Students were able to use the vocabulary from CharacterStrong to explain their actions with peers. Julie referenced one student's progression through the year of understanding the character trait:

He might not be able to say "perseverance," but he says, "I kept trying, I kept trying, I didn't give up." Today, he went and read and he said, "I sounded it out. And I tried and, I tried until I got it."

Julie recognized the student was employing a CharacterStrong trait without using the actual CharacterStrong terminology. The participants in this research study also articulated positive changes to students' SEL skill sets through their behaviors and communication with classroom peers.

Kindergarten teachers described their perceptions of student behaviors through student modeling. Modeling is when students model the character traits through their behavior and interactions with others. Students who modeled kindness and empathy

during their interactions with peers created positive relationships with each other. Julie observed students modeling the character traits that ultimately created stronger friendships. One student was playing basketball with another student and needed help. “One of them [student] was like, ‘I’ll teach you how to dribble the basketball like me.’ And so I see them getting things out of it [CharacterStrong], and they’re building close friendships with it as well.” Strong peer relationships were created by students modeling kindness and empathy.

Students also took on leadership roles in class and helped guide other students to follow the character traits part of the CharacterStrong program. The participants described students modeling honesty through class discussions of problems or emotions they experienced outside of school; students described the difficulty of not knowing how to process these emotions. Camryn observed that after teaching the character trait of honesty, students communicated more often about their home lives with each other. Students modeled honesty through class discussions of problems or emotions they experienced at home. Teachers saw that the CharacterStrong program and traits provided opportunities for students to understand that they are not alone in their feelings and emotions and provided a place for the class to process how to manage emotions, creating the ability to form peer relationships.

The teachers described students modeling, taking on leadership roles, and making friends after the CharacterStrong lessons. These findings confirm those of Morrison et al. (2019), who examined the implementation of an SEL program, Sanford Harmony. Morrison et al.’s study was much larger study than this CharacterStrong research study. The Sanford Harmony study included five elementary schools, with 27 classroom

observations and interviews with principals, teachers, and students (Morrison et al., 2019). The researchers found that of the teachers who used the program tools, 85% indicated the tools were effective. In the student focus groups, multiple students expressed the program helped them become better at making friends and interacting with new people (Morrison et al., 2019). So, in both research studies, large and small, teachers found SEL programs beneficial because students learned how to create better relationships, interact with others, and take on leadership roles.

Research Question 3: How Do Kindergarten Teachers' Social Roles Change Their Implementation of the CharacterStrong Program?

In answering how the kindergarten teachers' social roles changed the implementation of the CharacterStrong program, teachers described being aware of the responsibility and influence the adults in the building had on implementing CharacterStrong through their interactions with students. When teachers were aware of their implementation of the program, their self-efficacy in implementing the program improved.

Teachers considered their responsibility and influence on implementation. During the research study, the participants reflected on their social roles in the classroom. Teachers understood the amount of time they spend with students affects students' SEL. The teachers explained understanding the influence their beliefs had in implementing the CharacterStrong program and their status as the teacher and leader of the class. Camryn commented on the responsibility of adults in the building to influence students' social-emotional behavior: "I definitely think it's something that needs to happen in the classroom, whether we know we're doing it or not. You're teaching them how to interact, so I don't think it should just be the counselor." Camryn acknowledged that her role as a

teacher and leader in the class and on her team could empower the students' understanding of social-emotional skills vital to their well-being.

Teachers could empower their students by using the CharacterStrong traits and activities, or they could continue to focus on academics and ignore the social-emotional issues students in kindergarten experience. Teachers reflected that classroom teachers and other staff influenced students' behavior due to their social role and time spent with students. All participants realized that the adults in the building influence students' SEL, whether as a classroom teacher, specialist teacher, or counselor; all adults who interact with students at school have a social role that influences how students act. Julie described her thoughts on teaching CharacterStrong:

I feel like it's everyone on the campus's job to teach it [CharacterStrong], not just the counselor's job, because you can have a situation in music or in library or anywhere. And I feel like, I mean, any teacher would benefit to know about CharacterStrong, because it's great.

Julie's rationalization that all adults can influence student behavior exemplifies Bandura's (1977) theory that social roles affect student behavior.

The participants also found self-reflection concerning the implementation of CharacterStrong positively affected the implementation process. Julie described her influence over students' receptivity to the lessons: "If I don't believe it's going to work, then the kids would know, and I would never do it, but I do believe it's working, and that's why we do it." Being a 15-year kindergarten teacher, Julie had an idea about the impact of SEL but did not make it a priority until CharacterStrong was a district initiative. She knew she had to believe in the program before she could expect her students to.

The kindergarten teachers who consistently implemented the CharacterStrong Program increased their confidence in understanding SEL and, in turn, increased their self-efficacy as teachers. The participants described how self-reflection led to belief in implementation and self-efficacy of embedding SEL in their classroom. In a research study about the implementation of the RTI process, VanDerHeyden et al. (2007) found when implementing a system, awareness of implementation fidelity increases implementation and leads to teacher self-efficacy for differentiated instruction. Another research study about implementing a new RTI system, by Glover and DiPerna (2007), found that if the fidelity of implementation is not followed consistently or measured for validity, then the data on the interventions can be unreliable. In both research studies, teachers who were aware of their implementation and self-reflective of the implementation process increased their self-efficacy and effectiveness of implementation.

Implications for Practice

Findings from this study add to the growing research concerning SEL implementation in classrooms nationally (Anderson et al., 2020; Morrison et al., 2019). The teachers at the study school faced similar challenges as teachers across the state in closing achievement gaps while dealing with a range of behavior challenges in limited time. SEL competencies are even more critical amid the COVID-19 pandemic that shut down schools across the nation in 2020 and continues to impact schooling in 2021. With schools returning to in-person instruction after trauma that students, parents, and teachers endured during home learning, quarantine, and remote instruction, self-regulation, appropriate peer interaction, and implementation of SEL within the standardized curriculum are needed. When students develop social-emotional competencies, they are

more capable of seeking help when needed, managing their own emotions, and problem-solving in difficult situations (Yoder, 2014). There are two implications for educators based on the data analysis from this qualitative case study.

The first implication is that teachers need a scaffolded approach partnered with implementation tools or protocols to successfully implement an SEL program at an individual school or district-wide. Teachers in the research study commented on the intentionality of their actions and words as they implemented CharacterStrong. They described intentionally modeling and the reasoning behind their actions and words as they implemented program materials. They also explained how they intentionally scaffolded program materials from CharacterStrong during the lesson, and they described having to be mindful of the time they spent on SEL. Research supports that a scaffolded or multitiered approach to program implementation results in higher implementation fidelity. Noltemeyer et al. (2019) used the TFI to study PBIS implementation. The TFI is a self-assessment tool that measures the fidelity of implementation. Noltemeyer et al. (2019) found optimal implementation of PBIS requires a measurement tool, protocol, or system to help eliminate random variation within the implementation process. Without an assessment to measure the SEL implementation process, it is unknown whether teachers are implementing programs like CharacterStrong with fidelity. For the CharacterStrong program, an assessment tool that measures intentional modeling of words and actions, intentional use of words and actions associated with CharacterStrong, scaffolding program materials, and awareness of time spent implementing would help ensure implementation fidelity.

The second implication for practice is that without embedding self-reflection during implementation of SEL program materials, such as CharacterStrong, teachers may not gain self-efficacy, confidence, or awareness of their SEL practices. The participants in this study self-reflected on their understanding of their social roles in the school and their influence over the implementation process. The more participants reflected on the process captured during the two interviews, the more self-efficacy they had in implementing CharacterStrong. School and district leaders must embed self-reflection during implementation of SEL programs such as CharacterStrong. As mentioned previously, VanDerHeyden et al.'s (2007) research study about the implementation of the RTI process found that when implementing a system, self-awareness and self-reflection of implementation fidelity increase implementation and lead to teacher efficacy in differentiated instruction.

Future Research

SEL programs are a relatively new phenomenon for districts to implement; however, such programs are rising. The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 magnified the need for social-emotional competencies to be part of K-12 curriculum and instruction. The research surrounding the best implementation practices for SEL programs is limited. Research focusing specifically on kindergarten teachers' implementation of SEL is even more limited. During this research study, two recommendations emerged for future research.

The first recommendation is to conduct a longitudinal qualitative inquiry into SEL program implementation over time. Longitudinal research on early-childhood SEL and its effects would provide data on social-emotional health over time, which would inform

educators all over the nation on the successes and limitations of SEL programs. District leaders need information on the effects of SEL programs as students progress through the education system.

The teachers in this research study were self-motivated and interested in embedding SEL into their classrooms. However, research is limited concerning teacher capacity and implementation of SEL. Teachers have content knowledge, curriculum knowledge, and experiences in the classroom to guide their teaching and build their capacity. Still, they do not all have an understanding of SEL. More research is needed on SEL and teachers' beliefs in their perceived ability, skills, and expertise to teach social-emotional skills to students.

During this research study, Bandura's (1977) social learning theory was used as a framework for implementing SEL. His first tenet, learning by imitation, was measured using classroom observations. One 20-min classroom observation per participant was done during this research study. A limitation of this study was the amount of time and classroom observations conducted. More research is needed conducting classroom observations for more extended amounts of time and more frequent observations.

Conclusion

The need for social-emotional programs as an essential part of educating the whole child is growing. District and school leaders are increasingly aware of the need to provide programming and support for teachers to meet the needs of students. SEL programs like CharacterStrong are being purchased and implemented all over the country. Students enter the classroom with a variety of social skills, coping mechanisms, and self-regulation. CharacterStrong aims to build a foundation based on character traits

to help fill in the social-emotional gaps for students as they enter school. This research study examined teachers' implementation of CharacterStrong using Bandura's (1977) social learning theory as a framework for organizing the data from the research.

The data analysis showed three main themes from the study: (a) teachers' intentionality of their actions and words, (b) teachers' perceptions of students' behavior, and (c) teachers' social roles influencing the implementation of CharacterStrong. In the theme of learning by identification, the participants discussed the intentionality of their actions and words through modeling and reasoning. In the theme of learning by identification, the participants discussed their perceptions of student behavior through identifying and modeling. The final theme of learning through social roles included the participants' perceptions of how social roles influence the implementation of the CharacterStrong program. Implications for school districts are outlined and include implementing a scaffolded approach to SEL implementation and using self-reflection to increase teachers' self-efficacy. The findings also outlined future research needed on the longitudinal effects of SEL program implementation and teacher capacity to teach students social-emotional skills.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

Interview # ___ Date: _____ Participant: _____

Location: _____ Interview Purpose: _____

1. How many years have you been teaching kindergarten? How would you define social-emotional learning?
2. Tell me about a time in which you implemented social-emotional learning prior to CharacterStrong.
3. What are your goals in implementing CharacterStrong this semester?
4. Give me an example of what it looks like in your classroom when you implement one of your goals.
5. Some people would say that teaching social-emotional learning is the counselor's job; what would you say?
6. If I were in your class, what would I see and how would I feel related to social-emotional learning?

7. How do you think the following things affect teacher implementation of programs in school?

-Words

-Actions

-Beliefs

8. What are your thoughts on the CharacterStrong Program materials? Implementation process?

APPENDIX B

Observation Protocol

Classroom Observation #___ Date: _____ Participants: _____

Location: _____ Duration: _____ Observational Purpose: _____

Checklist notes	Reflective notes
Physical Setting: Roles:	
Words Vocabulary from CharacterStrong: Tone: warm, engaging, authoritative, Word Choice: Questions: Student responses:	

Response to students:	
Behaviors Modeling: Facial Expressions:	
Behaviors Nonverbal:	

REFERENCES

- Alahmari, A. (2019). A review and synthesis of the response to intervention (RtI) literature: Teachers' implementations and perceptions. *International Journal of Special Education*, 33(4), 894–909.
- Anderson, K. L., Weimer, M., & Wagner-Fuhs, M. (2020). Teacher fidelity to Conscious Discipline and children's executive function skills. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 51(2), 14–25. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2019.08.003>
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. Freeman.
- Bradshaw, C. P., Koth, C. W., Bevans, K. B., Ialongo, N., & Leaf, P. J. (2008). The impact of school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) on the organizational health of elementary schools. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 23(4), 462–473. <https://doi.org/10.1037/A0012883>
- Bridgeland, J., Bruce, M., & Hariharan, A. (2013). *The missing piece: A national teacher survey on how social and emotional learning can empower children and transform schools: A report for CASEL*. Civic Enterprises.
- Carlson, S. M., Faja, S., & Beck, D. M. (2016). Incorporating early development into the measurement of executive function: The need for a continuum of measures across development. In J. A. Griffin, P. McCardle, & L. S. Freund (Eds.), *Executive function in preschool-age children: Integrating measurement, neurodevelopment, and translational research* (pp. 45–64). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14797-003>
- Carroll, C., Patterson, M., Wood, S., Booth, A., Rick, J., & Balain, S. (2007). A conceptual framework for implementation fidelity. *Implementation Science*, 2, Article 40. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-2-40>
- Center on PBIS. (2021). *Getting started*. <https://www.pbis.org/pbis/getting-started>
- CharacterStrong. (2019). *PurposeFull People and CASEL standards*. <https://characterstrong.com/bundles/et/cs/pdf/PurposeFull%20People%20and%20CASEL%20Standards.pdf>
- CharacterStrong. (2020). *Pre-K-5 toolkit: PurposeFull People: SEL & character development*. <https://characterstrong.com/curricula/elementary>
- CharacterStrong. (n.d.-a). CharacterStrong. Retrieved August 10, 2021, from <https://www.characterstrong.com/>

- CharacterStrong. (n.d.-b). *CharacterStrong*. Retrieved August 12, 2021, from <https://characterstrong.com/about/proven-process>
- Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning. (2020). *CASEL's SEL framework: What are the core competence areas and where are they promoted?* <https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CASEL-SEL-Framework-11.2020.pdf>
- Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning. (2021). *History*. <https://casel.org/history/>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Dewey, J. (2008) *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. Macmillan. (Original work published 1916)
- Duffy, M., Giordano, V. A., & Farrell, J. B. (2008). No Child Left Behind: Values and research issues in high-stakes assessments. *Counseling and Values, 53*(1), 53–66. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-007X.2009.tb00113.x>
- Durlak, J. A. (2017). The fundamental importance of effective program implementation for successful character development. *Journal of Character Education, 13*(2), 1–11.
- Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development, 82*(1), 405–432.
- Erickson, F., Bagrodia, R., Cook-Sather, A., Espinoza, M., Jurow, S. Shultz, J. J., Spencer, J., Boostrom, R., & Noguera, P. (2008). Students' experience of school curriculum: The everyday circumstances of granting and withholding assent to learn. In F. M. Connelly, M. F. He, & J. Phillion (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of curriculum and instruction* (pp. 198–218). SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412976572.n10>
- Every Student Succeeds Act, Pub. L. No. 114-95 (2015).
- Fissel, E. R., Wilcox, P., & Tillyer, M. S. (2019). School discipline policies, perceptions of justice, and in-school delinquency. *Crime & Delinquency, 65*(10), 1343–1370. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128718794186>
- Fusarelli, L. D., & Ayscue, J. B. (2019). Is ESSA a retreat from equity? *Phi Delta Kappan, 101*(2), 32–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721719879152>

- Glover, T. A., & DiPerna, J. C. (2007). Service delivery for response to intervention: Core components and directions for future research. *School Psychology Review*, 36(4), 526–540. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02796015.2007.12087916>
- Hall, B. W., & Bacon, T. P. (2005). Building a foundation against violence: Impact of a school-based prevention program on elementary students. *Journal of School Violence*, 4(4), 63–83. https://doi.org/10.1300/J202v04n04_05
- Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-446 (2004).
- IRIS Center. (2020). *Steps to this RTI approach*. <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/rti01/cresource/q3/p06/>
- Katsiyannis, A., Whitford, D. K., & Ennis, R. P. (2018). Historical examination of United States intentional mass shootings in the 20th and 21st centuries: Implications for students, schools, and society. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 27, 2562–2573. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-018-1096-2>
- Keller-Margulis, M. A. (2012). Fidelity of implementation framework: A critical need for response to intervention models. *Psychology in the Schools*, 49(4), 342–352. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.21602>
- Landrum, T. J., Sweigart, C. A., & Collins, L. W. (2019). School shootings: What we know, what we can do. *Educational Leadership*, 77(2), 36–41.
- Linn, R. L. (1983). Testing and instruction: Links and distinctions. *Journal of Educational Measurement*, 20(2), 179–189.
- Marzano, R. J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. A. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Mergler, M. S., Vargas, K. M., & Caldwell, C. (2014). Alternative discipline can benefit learning. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 96(2), 25–30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721714553406>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2019). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Mirsky, L. (2011). Building safer, saner schools. *Educational Leadership*, 69(1), 45–49.

- Morrison, J. R., Reilly, J. M., & Ross, S. M. (2019). Getting along with others as an educational goal: An implementation study of Sanford Harmony. *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning*, 12(1), 16–34. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIT-03-2019-0042>
- National Implementation Research Network. (n.d.). *What are implementation stages*. Retrieved August 11, 2021, from <https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/module-4/topic-1-implementation-stages-overview/what-are-stages>
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110 (2002).
- Noltemeyer, A., Palmer, K., James, A. G., & Petrasek, M. (2019). Disciplinary and achievement outcomes associated with school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports implementation level. *School Psychology Review*, 48(1), 81–87. <https://doi.org/10.17105/SPR-2017-0131.V48-1>
- Noltemeyer, A., Petrasek, P., Stine, K., Palmer, K., Meehan, C., & Jordan, E. (2017). Evaluating and celebrating PBIS success: Development and implementation of Ohio’s PBIS recognition system. *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, 34, 215–241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15377903.2017.1381659>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). SAGE.
- Patton, M. Q. (2014). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Raičević, J., Nikolic, S., Vlasta, L., & Saračević, M. (2017). Teachers and social learning as a factor of modern educational competencies. *Bulgarian Journal of Science & Education Policy*, 11(2), 233–245.
- RTI Action Network. (n.d.). *What is RTI?* <http://www.rtinetwork.org/learn/what/whatisrti>
- Sander, J. B. (2010). School psychology, juvenile justice, and the school to prison pipeline. *Communique*, 39(4), 4–6.
- Sanford Harmony. (2015). *Sanford Harmony teacher handbook: Changing the world one classroom at a time*. https://www.sanfordharmony.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Sanford_Harmony_Book_V.13_091515.pdf
- Sanford Harmony. (2017). *Sanford Harmony early childhood*. https://www.sanfordharmony.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/fixed-SEC16_4553_LOWER-ELEMENTARY_Quick-Connection-CARDS_FINAL.pdf
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22, 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201>

- Special Education Guide. (2021). *Response to intervention*.
<https://www.specialeducationguide.com/pre-k-12/response-to-intervention/>
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. SAGE.
- Sugai, G., M., & Horner, R. H. (2020). Sustaining and scaling positive behavioral interventions and supports: Implementation drivers, outcomes, and considerations. *Exceptional Children, 86*(2), 120–136.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0014402919855331>
- Texas Education Agency. (2019). *Texas Academic Performance Reports*.
<https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/accountability/academic-accountability/performance-reporting/texas-academic-performance-reports>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2014). *Guiding principles: A resource guide for improving school climate and discipline*.
<https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/guiding-principles.pdf>
- VanDerHeyden, A. M., Witt, J. C., & Gilbertson, D. (2007). A multi-year evaluation of the effects of a response to intervention (RTI) model on identification of children for special education. *Journal of School Psychology, 45*(2), 225–256.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2006.11.004>
- Wanless, S. B., & Domitrovich, C. E. (2015). Readiness to implement school-based social-emotional learning interventions: Using research on factors related to implementation to maximize quality. *Prevention Science, 16*(8), 1037–1043.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-015-0612-5>
- Weisberg, R. P., Kumpfer, K. L., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2003). Prevention that works for children and youth. *American Psychologist, 58*(6/7), 425–432.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.58.6-7.425>
- Welsh, E. (2002). Dealing with data: Using NVivo in the qualitative data analysis process. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 3*(2). <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-3.2.865>
- Whitney, C. R., & Candelaria, C. A. (2017). The effects of No Child Left Behind on children’s socioemotional outcomes. *AERA Open, 3*(3).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858417726324>
- Yin, R. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE.
- Yoder, N. (2014). *Teaching the whole child: Instructional practices that support social-emotional learning in three teacher evaluation frameworks*. Center on Great Teachers & Leaders.
<https://gtlcenter.org/sites/default/files/TeachingtheWholeChild.pdf>